How to ask for permission

Quiz

1) Would it be _____ if I borrow your pen?
   a. alright
   b. right
   c. rightly

2) Can I _____ the day off tomorrow, please?
   a. taking
   b. take
   c. took

3) Would it be OK _____ I use your phone charger?
   a. whether
   b. unless
   c. if
Answers

1) a

2) b

3) c
Transcript

Jackie
Hello this is bbclearningenglish.com with me, Jackie Dalton. This programme is about asking permission, which means asking someone if you're allowed to do something. Listen to this first example, which shows one of the most common ways of asking permission.

EXAMPLE
Hinna, can I use your computer for a minute?

Jackie
Very simple: the phrase can I followed by the verb. But what verb form comes after the phrase can I? Listen to these two examples of asking.

EXAMPLES
Can we call you back later?
Can I use your scissors?

Jackie
Call and use are both base forms of the verb, which is the infinitive without to. Now let's listen to a slightly different way of asking permission.

EXAMPLE
Oh Emily, I forgot to bring my phone charger today; could I borrow yours for a minute please?

Jackie
Instead of can I borrow, we hear could I...? Using Could I...? instead of Can I...? sounds slightly more formal. You might use could if you want to be more polite. Like the word can, could is always used with the base infinitive form of the verb.

EXAMPLE
Could you write me a summary of the report?
Jackie
You may have spotted a phrase that came up at the end of a couple of the clips we heard earlier.

EXAMPLES
Hinna, can I use your computer for a minute?
Oh Emily, I forgot to bring my phone charger today; could I borrow yours for a minute, please?

Jackie
Both speakers asked permission to do something for a minute. They didn't literally mean they would spend sixty seconds using the computer or borrowing the phone charger. But it's a way of showing that you only want to borrow something for a short time and you're trying not to bother the other person too much.

EXAMPLE
Hinna, can I use your computer for a minute?
Oh Emily, I forgot to bring my phone charger today; could I borrow yours for a minute, please?

Jackie
We also heard the magic word please at the end of that question. Parents often get very cross with their children if they ask for something without using the word please. But the reality is that it's often fine not to include it. We tend to use intonation in our questions to sound polite, so we don't always need the extra please. Listen to these examples. The first doesn't sound very polite.

EXAMPLE
Could I have that. (demanding)

Jackie
But the second...

EXAMPLE
Could I have that? (questioning)
Jackie
...sounds more like a polite question than an aggressive demand because of the way the voice goes up.

EXAMPLE
Could you give that to me. (demanding)
Could you give that to me? (questioning)

Jackie
Listen to some more examples of the differences.

EXAMPLES
Could I see you.
Could I see you?

Jackie
The second phrase came across as a polite question, unlike the first. What about here?

EXAMPLES
Could you give that to me?
Could you give that to me.

Jackie
This time, the first question was sounded more polite because of the way it was asked. As long as you ask your question in a polite tone of voice, you don't really need a please. Having said that, there's never anything wrong with using please when asking permission.
Let's look at another structure for asking permission.

EXAMPLE
Matt, would it be OK if I took the afternoon off on Friday?

Jackie
Would it be OK if - a fairly informal way of asking permission. You could also say, Would it be alright if...? What verb form follows these questions?

EXAMPLES
Matt, would it be OK if I took the afternoon off on Friday?
I'm not feeling well today; would it be alright if I did this tomorrow?
Jackie
In both these cases, the phrases are followed by the past subjunctive form of the verb. However, you could also use the present form - this sounds slightly less formal.

EXAMPLES
Matt, would it be OK if I take the afternoon off on Friday?
I'm not feeling well today; would it be alright if I do this tomorrow?

Jackie
So would it be OK if...? and would it be alright if...? can be followed by the present or, for a slightly more formal effect, the past subjunctive. If you want to be even more polite, another variation on the structures we've just heard is would I be able to...?

EXAMPLE
Would I be able to talk to you about something?

Jackie
Would I be able to - a polite way of asking permission. Now it's time to check you've understood the things we've looked at. Which of these requests is correct - the first or the second?

EXAMPLES
Can she sits here?
Can she sit here?

Jackie
The second phrase is correct - remember do you mind if...? is used with the base infinitive verb form. Now, which of these two questions sounds the most formal?

EXAMPLES
Would I be able to talk to you about something?
Is it OK if I leave early?

Jackie
The first question is more formal. Would I be able to...? sounds more distant than is it OK if...? And the last question now: I'm going to ask a question in two different ways. Which one is a more polite way of asking the question — the first or the second?
EXAMPLES
Can I help you.
Can I help you?

Jackie
Well the second sounded more polite because of my intonation. And I hope I have managed to be a help to you in this programme and that you now feel a little more confident about asking permission. That's all for this week, but in a later programme we'll be exploring some of the structures you can use to answer these kinds of questions.