

8. Special Helping Verbs

We often use the helping verbs, or modals—*do, did, can, could, will, would, should, may, must* and *might*. But two of these helping verbs—*would* and *could*—seem to cause problems because we use them in the wrong time, or tense.

Showing Habitual Action

Present Habitual Action

We often use simple present tense to show actions that are repeated or habitual in the present:

Mario enjoys both sunny and cloudy days. On warm sunny days, he sits in the sun for awhile; then he waters his plants, rearranges flower pots in his patio, and pulls weeds, or he washes, waxes, and polishes his car. On cloudy days, he stays inside and reads a book.

This paragraph describes Mario's usual or customary actions in his present life. Notice that we do not use *would* when naming present habitual action.

Past Habitual Action

If we want to show past actions that were repeated or habitual, we can use would + base form of a verb:

When Mario lived in Colorado, he enjoyed both sunny and cloudy days. He would sit in the sun for awhile; then he would water his plants, rearrange flower pots in his patio, and pull weeds, or he would wash, wax, and polish his car. On cloudy days, he would stay inside and read a book.

This paragraph describes Mario's usual or customary actions when he lived in Colorado—past actions that he performed regularly and routinely. We use would + verb to show past habitual behavior.

More often, we use both would + verb forms and simple past tense verbs when we write about a past time, because some of the actions are habitual or customary, while others are states of being or feelings, or actions that aren't habitual. Read the following paragraph; each verb is underlined.

Some years ago, my grandfather died, but my memories of him are vivid to this day. He enjoyed being around small children, and would sing to them, rocking them back and forth in an old overstuffed rocking chair. He would invent silly games, which they loved, and would come up with even sillier jokes, making everyone under the age of six laugh. He would help anyone in need, and since he was married to a woman who had seven sisters, there was always someone, somewhere, in need of help. But he never wanted the rest of the family to know about his generosity; he liked his acts of kindness to be secrets.

Exercise 2

Now write a paragraph describing the routine you followed after school when you were an elementary school student. Use *would* + base form of the verb to describe customary actions, and simple past tense verbs to name states of being or feeling.

After I got home from elementary school, _____

Showing Ability

Writers often confuse the helping verbs *can* and *could* when writing about abilities.

Use **can** to show present ability.

To show present ability, use can + base form of the verb. If we know how to do something now, we can say:

I can swim.

I know how to swim.

Sam *can speak* Tagalog.

Sam *knows how to speak* Tagalog.

Use **could** to show past ability.

To show past ability, use could + base form of the verb. If we knew how to do something in the past, we can say:

I could swim when I was five.

I knew how to swim when I was five.

Sam *could speak* Tagalog as a boy.

Sam *knew how to speak* Tagalog as a boy.

Exercise 3

Write 5 sentences naming abilities you have now (things you know how to do now).
Use can + base form of the verb to show present abilities.

Example: Now that I'm a college student, I *can do* research well.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Exercise 4

Write 5 sentences naming abilities you had (things you knew how to do) when you were a child.
Use could + base form of the verb to show past ability.

Example: When I was ten, I *could ski* like a pro.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Note: **the verbs following would, can and could, and any other modals, don't have -ed or -s endings.**

Exercise 5

In the following sentences, correct any errors in verbs showing present and past habitual action or present and past ability. Check to see that simple present tense shows present habitual actions and *would* + base form of the verb shows past habitual actions. Check to see that *can* shows present ability and *could* shows past ability.

incorrect: Every day when I finish my homework, I would watch a movie.

correct: Every day when I finish my homework, I **watch** a movie.

incorrect: Now I could understand the novel that I couldn't understand yesterday.

correct: Now I **can understand** the novel that I couldn't understand yesterday.

1. Usually I would buy coffee when I arrive on campus so I could be more alert.
2. This semester, I review my notes and would test myself before every test.
3. When I was in high school, I can work with computers as well as any adult.
4. Michael could drive now, but he couldn't when he was in his twenties.
5. As a young child, I would visit my grandmother every Sunday, but now I couldn't because she lives too far away.
6. Men and women would usually share the housework now, but twenty years ago, men rarely would do any housework.
7. Now I usually go over to my best friend's house every Saturday night because she could make the best pasta dinners.
8. Although Tia is only four, she could already read and would read all the time.
9. Contemporary families generally would spend less time doing family activities.
10. Now that I'm an adult, I could stay out as late as I want.