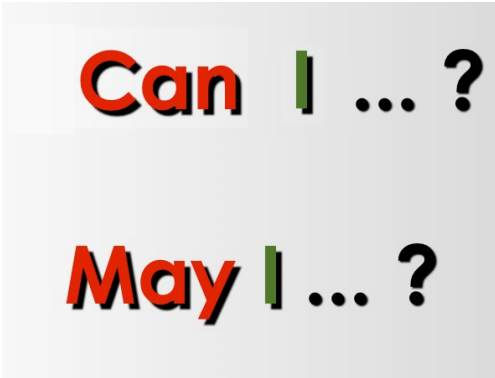


Can I or May I - know the difference in usage

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The confusion over the right word to use - can or may - continues to persist. "Can I go swimming tomorrow" or "May I go swimming tomorrow?" A tough nut to crack, isn't it? Many English speakers are confused on the right word to use. Today, let us learn how to identify the right word to use based on the different contexts.



Permission or ability

In the grammar world, 'can' is basically used to describe physical or mental ability while 'may' is used when requiring permission or to state a possibility. Therefore, the key difference between the two is that 'can' denotes ability and 'may' denotes permission. However, still many of us are unable to use the words can and may at correct places. Let us look at some examples to develop our understanding.

Can for ability

Can you do the international dance form?

I can do the international dance form

Can you finish your assignment by tonight?

I can finish the assignment by 7 pm.

May for permission/possibility

May I go to the birthday party tonight?

Yes you can go to the birthday party tonight.

May I have a pizza for lunch?

No, you can't eat a pizza for lunch.

Generally, when an individual asks a permission, the answer includes a can, can't or cannot instead of may or may not. In spoken English, it is incorrect to say, 'Can I drink water?' The right sentence would be 'May I

drink water?’

However it is alright to use can in an informal situation to ask for permission.

Can I use your computer?

You can use my computer

Now, in a sentence like this, can you guess the right word to use?

Please leave your business card so that I can/may call you back.

What do you think the above sentence is about – permission, ability or possibility

In such confusing situations, it is best to follow this approach:

Use can if you intend able to

Use may if there is a possibility

Use may if you intend permitted to

Now, in the sentence above if you are likely to call, use ‘may’ and if you are sure you will call, use ‘can.’

Conclusion

English grammar can be confusing, especially to beginner English learners. Therefore, it is important to seek correct guidance and learn from the basics. You can join our [online spoken English class](#) and learn more about grammar and improve your English speaking skills.

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- By Chander Madan

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