

How to Seek Permission in English: The Correct Usage of ‘Can’ and ‘May’

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An important aspect of communication between any two individuals is seeking and obtaining permission to carry out any specific activity or task. Right from our childhood and school days, we have been taught to ask permission from our parents or teachers, whether this is to take or do something.



Whether you will be successful in getting the permission, depends on the way you ask. Here are some key considerations to bear in mind.

Be polite when you ask for permission: Being polite is a great virtue at any time; it is especially so when you are trying to ask for permission. It is important to sound like you really mean to ask for permission and not like you are just completing a formality. The tone in which you ask determines how your question will be perceived.



Time it right: Ask for permission at the right time. It will not be appropriate to put in your request at the last minute in most cases. It is disruptive to the person who has to give permission. Moreover, the giver may deem it offensive and an indication of lack of respect for both time as well as accepted organisational practices if such requests come in at the last minute. Of course, if the matter is extremely urgent and there is an emergency situation, by all means go and ask for due permission without prior notice. In fact, if the situation is extremely critical that you don't have time to seek permission, then you should do the next best thing: at the earliest opportunity, inform and

update those concerned your action with an explanation of why you couldn't wait to obtain permission. In most cases, concerned folks will demonstrate empathy and accept your explanation.

Now, we come to the manner in which we ask for permission. Very often, we hear questions like this:

- "Can I go home an hour early today?"
- "Can I work from home today?"

The problem with this question lies in the usage of "Can" at the beginning of the question. When you use "Can", it implies a question on your ability to do the thing that you are asking permission for.

For example, the person to whom the above questions are put can very well answer: "Yes, of course, you can. But you may not!". What this person is effectively saying is that whether or not you can go home early or work from home is entirely in your control, but whether or not I allow you to do it is in my control.

So, the right way to ask for permission in English is by asking a question using "May" instead of "Can". When you begin the question with "may" there is no ambiguity about the purpose of your question - it is very clear that you are seeking permission.

Some people choose to seek permission in the form of a statement that expresses a desire or request. For example, it would be in the form of something like: "I would like to ask for your permission to go home early today." or "I request you to allow me to go home early today."

Though this format is correct, in our opinion, it is slightly long-winded. Moreover, the greater focus still seems to be on you, the person asking for permission rather than putting the onus on the person receiving it.

We prefer and recommend the question format starting with "May" , as it seems much more concise and gives the impression of greater control and authority to the permission-giver.

The next time you are about to ask somebody for permission, remember to start the question with 'May' instead of 'Can'!

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