Could, can and would

Could, *can*, and *would* can be confusing in English. *Could*, *would*, and *can* are all modal verbs and they can be difficult to master. Let's look at each one separately, and then compare some of their more confusing uses.

Can has many uses as a modal verb, but there are three uses that can be confusing to an English learner. These are: when *can* is used to describe ability ("I can change the oil in my car without help."), ask for permission ("Can I go to the movies tonight?"), or say whether something is possible or not ("Do you think he can win the race?"). *Can* is also used to suggest something might happen in the future ("If you finish your homework, we can go to the movies.").

Can, like *could* and *would*, is used to ask a polite question, but *can* is only used to ask permission to do or say something ("Can I borrow your car?" "Can I get you something to drink?").

Could is the past tense of *can*, but it also has uses apart from that--and that is where the confusion lies. When *could* is used as the past tense of *can*, it refers to an ability that a person generally had in the past or to something that was generally possible in the past ("When I was younger, I could run for miles," or "It used to be you could buy lunch for a dollar.").

Like *can*, *could* can be used of possibility as well, but the connotation is slightly different. In the sentence "We can have as many as ten people for dinner tonight," *can* is used to show ability ("We are able to have as many as ten people for dinner tonight;" “We have enough food/space for ten people.”).

By contrast, when *could* is used in this way, it refers to something that you believe is likely to be true or to happen. In the sentence "We could have as many as ten people come to dinner tonight," *could* is used to say that it is possible that ten people will come to the speaker’s home for dinner ("I think that it is possible we will have as many as ten people for dinner tonight.").

Could is also used to refer to something that you wish to have or do but that is not possible ("If only we could be free of this tyrant!"). It’s also used to describe something that was possible but did not happen, used with the verb *have* ("We could have won if we had practiced harder."). *Could* can also express annoyance or another strong emotion ("He could have asked me if I needed help!" or "I could have died I was so embarrassed!"), but *can* isn’t used this way.

When making general polite suggestions or asking a question, both *could* and *can* are possible ("Excuse me, can/could you tell me what time it is?").

Would is a little easier to understand because it is not related to *could* or *can*, and its uses are more specific. *Would* is used to talk about a possible situation that has not happened or that you are imagining ("I would quit my job if I won the lottery."), and it is also used with *have* to describe a situation that could have happened but did not ("She would have eaten less if she had known there was going to be dessert.").

Like *could*, *would* is used to describe something that you think is likely to be true or likely to happen ("I think the meal would [=could] feed ten people." "He said he would help me with this set of exercises when he gets home.").

Would can also be used to ask polite questions ("Would you mind if I had another cup of tea?"), or to wish for something ("I wish she would write a book."). It has several distinct uses that *can* and *could* do not, however: it is used to give opinions ("I wouldn't do that if I were you," or "I would say that she is in her 30s. [=it is my opinion that she is between 30 and 39 years old]"); it is used to express a willingness to do something ("I would be happy to take her to the airport"); and it is used to express frustration with something that you believe a person always does ("Well, he would say that, wouldn't he? He always says that!")

For one, *can* is more informal; *may* is formal. The school marm can't let you say *Can I*, and your friends may not like it if you say *May I*.

It's "**May** I have **your pen please**". When you **use can, you are** asking if you have **the** ability to have **the pen**. But when you **use may**, you **are** asking for permission to have **the pen**.

Which is correct if I want to request for a pen?

- **Can** I have your pen please?
- **May** I have your pen please?

Answers

Can primarily expresses possibility and ability and, secondarily, permission. *May* expresses primarily possibility and, secondarily, permission and volition. In seeking permission, as in your examples, the use of *may* is much more formal and polite than *can* and is used rather less.
However, both 'Can I have your pen please?' and 'May I have your pen please?' are blunt ways of making a request. In practice, a native

speaker, at least of British English, is much more likely to say something like 'You don't happen to have a pen I could borrow, do you?'

You don't happen to have a pen I could borrow, do you?' would give the person enough time to think, rethink and decide otherwise than to risk it, perhaps?

Is there any difference between **can** and **may** when used to request or express permission, as in : ***may*** *I ask you a few questions?* or : ***can*** *I ask you a few questions?* It is still widely held that using **can** for permission is somehow incorrect and that it should be reserved for expressions denoting capability, as in : ***can*** *you swim?* Although the use of the 'permission' sense of **can** is not regarded as incorrect in standard English, there is a clear difference in formality between the two verbs: **may** is, generally speaking, a more polite way of asking for something and is the better choice in more formal contexts.

People also ask

Could is the past tense of can?
When **could** is used as the **past tense of can**, it refers to an ability that a person generally had in the **past** or to something that was generally possible in the **past** ("When I was younger, I **could** run for miles," or "It used to be you **could** buy lunch for a dollar.").

Could is usually followed by an infinitive without ‘to’: I’m glad you could come. Sometimes it is used without a following infinitive: I came as quickly as I could.
Could does not change its form, so the third person singular form does not end in ‘-s’: She could play the violin when she was six.
Questions and negatives are formed without ‘do’: Could he help you?I could not breathe.
The negative form could not is often shortened in conversation or informal writing to couldn’t: I couldn’t find her phone number.
Could is often used in question tags: They couldn’t see us, could they?
Could has no tenses, no participles, and no infinitive form.
There is no past tense, but could have followed by a past participle is used for referring to something in the past that was not real, or something that may possibly have been real: I could have been killed. What was that noise? Could it have been the wind?
Could is used as the past tense of can when it means that someone had the ability to do something, or that something was possible: The Roman army could march 30 miles in a day.

But if you want to say that someone actually succeeded in doing something, use was/were able to: Thanks to this grant, we were able to buy new equipment.