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dictionary

of the
English
Language



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The Usage Panel is a group of nearly 200 prominent scholars, creative writers, journalists, diplomats, and others in occupations requiring mastery of language. Annual surveys have gauged the acceptability of particular usages and grammatical constructions.

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can¹  (kăn; kən when unstressed)

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aux.v. past tense could (k d)

1.

- a. Used to indicate physical or mental ability: *I can carry both suitcases. Can you remember the war?*
- b. Used to indicate possession of a specified power, right, or privilege: *The president can veto congressional bills.*
- c. Used to indicate possession of a specified capability or skill: *I can tune the harpsichord as well as play it.*

2.

- a. Used to indicate possibility or probability: *I wonder if my long lost neighbor can still be alive. Such things can and do happen.*
- b. Used to indicate that which is permitted, as by conscience or feelings: *One can hardly blame you for being upset.*
- c. Used to indicate probability or possibility under the specified circumstances: *They can hardly have intended to do that.*

3. *Usage Problem* Used to request or grant permission: *Can I be excused?*

[Middle English, first and third person sing. present tense of *connen*, to know how, from Old English *cunnan*; see **gnō-** in the [Appendix of Indo-European roots](#).]

Usage Note: Generations of grammarians and teachers have insisted that *can* should be used only to express the capacity to do something, and that *may* must be used to express permission. But children do not use *can* to ask permission out of a desire to be stubbornly perverse. They have learned it as an idiomatic expression from adults: *After you clean your room, you can go outside and play.* As part of the spoken language, this use of *can* is perfectly acceptable. This is especially true for negative questions, such as *Can't I have the car tonight?* probably because using *mayn't* instead of *can't* sounds unnatural. While the distinction between *can* and *may* still has its adherents in formal usage, the number appears to be falling. In our 2009 survey, 37 percent of the Usage Panel rejected *can* instead of *may* in the sentence *Can I take another week to submit the application?* But more than half of these said *can* was only "somewhat (rather than completely) unacceptable" in this use, and the overall percentage of disapproval fell from more than 50 percent in an earlier survey. · The heightened formality of *may* sometimes highlights the speaker's role in giving permission. *You may leave the room when you are finished* implies that permission is given by the speaker. *You can leave the room when you are finished* implies that permission is part of a rule or policy rather than a decision on the speaker's part. For this reason, *may* sees considerable use in official announcements: *Students may pick up the application forms tomorrow.* · Like *may*, *can* is also used to indicate what is possible: *It may rain this afternoon. Bone spurs can be very painful.* In this use, both *can* and *may* often have personal subjects: *You may see him at the concert. Even an experienced driver can get lost in this town.*

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can²  (kăn)

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n.

1. A usually cylindrical metal container.

2.

a. An airtight container, usually made of tin-coated iron, in which foods or beverages are preserved.

b. The contents of such a container: *ate a can of beans*.

3. Slang A jail or prison.

4. Slang A toilet or restroom.

5. Slang The buttocks.

6. Slang A naval destroyer.

v. canned, can-ning, cans

v.tr.

1. To seal in an airtight container for future use; preserve: *canning peaches*.

2. Slang To make a recording of: *can the audience's applause for a TV comedy show*.

3. Slang

a. To end the employment of; fire. See Synonyms at [dismiss](#).

b. To put an end or stop to: *canned the TV show after one season; told the students to can the chatter*.

v.intr.

To solicit cash donations for a charity or other organization such as a club or amateur sports team by holding out a can or other container in a public place.

Idioms:

can of corn *Sports*

Something that is easily accomplished, especially a routine catch of a fly ball in baseball.

can of worms

A complex or difficult problem.

in the can

Completed and ready for release, as a film or scene of a film.

[Middle English *canne*, a water container, from Old English.]

can *ner n.*

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Can.

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abbr.

1. Canada

2. Canadian

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can.

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abbr.

1.

a. canceled

b. cancellation

2. canon

3. canto

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Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

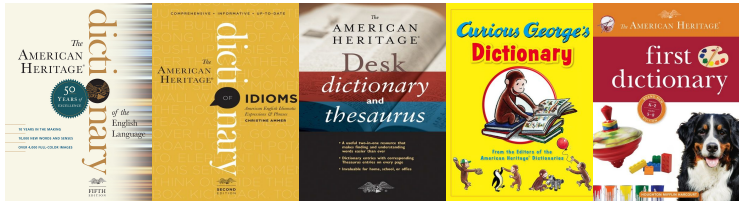
Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

[Indo-European Roots](#)

[Semitic Roots](#)

The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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