



02. Can & Could, Want & Would Like, Must & Should

Expressing can, could, want, would like, must and should can be a tricky business but with this overview you'll get to grips with it

Irregular Verbs

So, in *Grammar Boost 1*, we looked at verbs which follow a specified pattern. We can rely on these verbs like comfortable friends but let's check out the rogues; the maverick, irregular verbs that need some extra attention!

In this *Grammar Boost*, I have grouped together four of these irregular verbs for you to focus on. They have been selected due to their frequency of use and the fact that they all act in a similar way. For each verb, I'll teach you how to correctly conjugate it in the present tense but I'll also draw your attention to any other useful ways to use it – look out for the 'Useful' icon.

I'll also give you example sentences. I actually think that learning complete expressions or full sentences is a more efficient and natural way to retain language as opposed to learning verb tables but see what works for you.

Modal verbs

In English, we have what we call 'modal verbs'. These are verbs like 'could' and 'should' which indicate possibility, obligation or permission and are some of the most commonly used verbs in language.

The closest equivalent we have to modal verbs in French are *pouvoir* (to be able to), *vouloir* (to want to) and *devoir* (to have to). It makes sense to learn these at the same time as they act in similar ways when conjugated.



These verbs are always followed by an infinitive i.e. the whole verb. Example *Je veux manger* (I want to eat) or *On doit partir* (We must go)

The fourth verb we will look at is *savoir*. It is an interesting French verb (if you like that kind of thing!) as it is not only used in the sense of 'to know' but also 'to know **how to do something**'. It is an important verb for expressing 'can' so we are going to look at it and compare it to *pouvoir*.

So let's take a deep dive into these key verbs: *pouvoir*, *vouloir*, *devoir* and *savoir* individually.

1. *pouvoir* – to be able to/ can

je peux	tu peux
il/ elle/ on peut	nous pouvons
vous pouvez	ils/ elles peuvent
Past Participle	pu



Listen to the verb *pouvoir* in the present tense + past participle

Useful!

- **'Could'**: Formed using the conditional tense – *On pourrait...* (*aller au parc*) We could ... (go to the park)
- **'Can you...?'**: This can be formed by inverting the verb and subject pronoun 'tu' – *Peux-tu...* (*me passer le pain*)? Can you... (pass me the bread)? Check out the *Grammar Boost* on formulating questions for other ways.

2. *vouloir* – to want to

je veux	tu veux
il/ elle/ on veut	nous voulons
vous voulez	ils/ elles veulent
Past Participle	voulu



Listen to the verb *vouloir* in the present tense + past participle

Useful!

- Example from Mini Life Video *'Il fait froid'*: "*Je veux aller dehors*" I want to go outside
- **'Would like'**: Formed using the conditional tense – *Je voudrais...* (*un croissant s'il te plaît*) I would like... (a croissant please). This is a more polite form of asking for something and don't forget the 'please'!
- **'Would you like' / 'Do you want'**: This can be formed by inverting the verb and subject pronoun. Check out the *Grammar Boost* on formulating questions for other ways. I am also going to suggest that you stick to the present tense when asking this question even though in English we are more inclined to use the conditional ("Would you...").

Example: Do you want/ Would you like... (some orange juice)?

1. Plural or formal: *Voulez-vous...*(*du jus d'orange*)?
2. Singular or informal: *Veux-tu...*(*du jus d'orange*)?

3. *devoir* – to have to (must)

je dois	tu dois
il/ elle/ on doit	nous devons
vous devez	ils/ elles doivent
Past Participle	dû



Listen to the verb *devoir* in the present tense + past participle

Useful!

- **'Must vs 'Should':** Technically, the conditional tense of *devoir* is the translation of 'should'. However, when to use the present tense and when to use the conditional tense to express 'should' is not clear-cut. It depends on the context. *Je dois partir* and *Je devrais partir* could both potentially be used for 'I should leave' but *Je dois partir* insinuates a greater sense of obligation.
- **Strengthening and softening 'must':** To clarify, French speakers may use the present tense but strengthen the meaning with something like *absolument*. *Je dois absolument partir* – I really must leave. Using the conditional softens the meaning somewhat i.e. *Je devrais partir mais je n'ai pas envie!* I should leave but I do not want to!

4. *savoir* – to know or to know how to do something/ be able to

Savoir (to know) is often included in the *pouvoir/ vouloir/ devoir* group as it follows a similar conjugation pattern.

Furthermore, it can be translated not only as 'to know' but also as 'to know **how to do something**'. That means it is often a better verb for translating 'can' than *pouvoir*. When used in this context it is followed by an infinitive. Like the the *pouvoir/ vouloir/ devoir* group.

Example: *Il peut nager* (sentence 1) vs *Il sait nager* (sentence 2)

In sentence 1, we are saying that he is physically able to swim should he so want to but it is not clear if he actually knows how. In sentence 2, we are saying he can swim and he knows how to swim. Perhaps a subtle difference, but important to note.

je sais	tu sais
il/ elle/ on sait	nous savons
vous savez	ils/ elles savent
Past Participle	su



Listen to the verb *savoir* in the present tense + past participle

 Useful!

- **Savoir vs Connaitre: Can you do the can-can?**

I won't go into detail in this *Grammar Boost* but these verbs both mean 'to know'. They are interchangeable in some instances when talking about knowing a piece of information. Where they differ; *connaître* is best used when talking about knowing a person or being familiar with a place. *Savoir* is always a better choice for knowing how to do something.

Example: *Tu sais faire le can-can?* Can you do the can-can? vs *Je connais une danseuse de can-can.* I know a can-can dancer.

So we have made a good start on irregular verbs. It is a chunky subject which comes with practice. I hope that it is a useful overview and that you have gained some practical insights into these key verbs.