

'Can' or 'May', 'Will' or 'Shall'

Read the examples given below.

Can I come in, Sir?

May I come in, Sir?

Is one of these two sentences more correct than the other?

Well, actually, in modern English they are both considered acceptable.

May is preferred in a formal style or when you want to be more polite. In less formal situations, can is perfectly acceptable.

Both can and may are used to ask for permission. However, a lot of people believe that can is incorrect in this context.

In their opinion, 'can' can only be used to talk about ability and capability.

Study the sentences given below.

Can you speak English?

Can he swim?

In modern English, both 'can' and 'may' can be used to talk about permission. However, 'may' cannot be used to talk about ability.

'Shall' or 'will'?

In British English, 'shall' is used with first person pronouns to form the simple future tense.

I shall come.

We shall be late.

With second and third person pronouns, 'will' is used to form the simple future.

He will come.

'Can' or 'May', 'Will' or 'Shall'

She will pass.

You will get the job.

However, when it comes to expressing ideas such as determination or threat, these rules are reversed. That means 'will' is used with first person pronouns and 'shall' is used with second and third person pronouns.

You shall pay for this. (Threat)

I will do it. (Determination)

However, these distinctions are no longer observed. 'Shall' is quite uncommon in American English. In British English, too, it is becoming much less common.

Who or whom

'Who' is used in the subject position. 'Whom' is used in the object position.

Who said that? (NOT Whom said that?)

Whom do you want to meet? (Here 'whom' is the object of the verb 'meet'.)

Some people still follow these rules, but there are several others who never use 'whom'. In modern English, the standard practice is to use 'who' in all situations.