

Posse (to be able) in the past tense

In Latin, you can use 'posse' in the past continuous or simple past tense to show when someone was able to do something in the past. The two tenses look like this:

<i>past continuous</i>	<i>simple past</i>	
poteram	potui	I was able, I could
poteras	potuisti	you were able, you could
poterat	potuit	he/she/it was able, could
poteramus	potuimus	we were able, we could
poteratis	potuistis	y'all were able/could
poterant	potuerunt	they were able/they could

In English, you can translate both past tenses of posse (+ infinitive verb) as 'was able to do' or 'could do'.

Exercise 1 – What was I able (or not able) to do yesterday?

The following sentences contain a mixture of past continuous and simple past versions of 'posse'. Translate the sentence into English using 'I was able' or 'I could'. The first one is done for you.

1. heri dormire poteram.

Yesterday I was able to sleep (or I could sleep).

heri yesterday

2. heri ridere poteram.

Yesterday I was able to laugh (or I could laugh).

3. heri laborare potui.

Yesterday I was able to work (or I could work).

4. heri cantare non potui.

Yesterday I was not able to sing (or I could not sing).

5. heri in villa manere poteram.

Yesterday I was able to stay in the house (or I could stay in the house).

6. heri matrem invenire potui.

Yesterday I was able to find mum (or I could find mum).

7. heri in horto dormire poteram.

Yesterday I was able to sleep in the garden (or I could sleep in the garden).

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Exercise 2 – Who could do what?

Translate the sentence into English working out who was able and then what they were able to do. The first one is done for you.

1. iuvenis navigare poterat.

The young man was able to sail (or The young man could sail)

2. ridere poteramus.

We were able to laugh. (or We could laugh.)

3. sorores panem invenire potuerunt.

The sisters were able to find bread. (or could find...)

4. per vias currere potuistis.

Y'all were able to run through the streets. (or could run...)

5. maga reginam mutare potuit.

The witch was able to change the queen. (or could change...)

6. respondere non poteras.

You were not able to reply. (or could not reply...)

You were not able to reply. (or could not reply...)

7. senex fabulas miras narrare poterat.

The old man was able to tell amazing stories. (or could tell...)

8. "aquam portare non potuimus!" clamavit pastor.

"We were not able to carry the water!" exclaimed the shepherd
shouted. (or could not carry...)

9. infantes bene scribere non poterant.

The children were not able to write well. (or could not write...)

10. vitam regis servare potuisti.

You were able to save the king's life. (or could save...)