

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.

3. heri laborare potui.

4. heri cantare non potui.

5. heri in villa manere poteram.

6. heri matrem invenire potui.

7. heri in horto dormire poteram.

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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.

3. sorores panem invenire potuerunt.

4. per vias currere potuistis.

5. maga reginam mutare potuit.

6. respondere non poteras.

7. senex fabulas miras narrare poterat.

8. “aquam portare non potuimus!” clamavit pastor.

9. infantes bene scribere non poterant.

10. vitam regis servare potuisti.
