Saying you can: the potential form

Oboeru 覚える

How to say you can do something — “I can swim”, “I can read this”. One ending replaces a whole phrase, and it changes one particle with it.

The rule, by verb group

Group 2 · る-verbs (ichidan) — drop る, add られる. 開ける → 開けられる *akeru → akerareru*

Group 3 · irregular — する → できる *dekiru*, 来る → 来られる *korareru*

Group 1 · う-verbs (godan) — change the last kana to the one in the same row with an **e** sound, then add る:

Group 1: swap the last kana for its e sound

Dictionary form ends in	う	く	ぐ	す	つ	ぬ	ぶ	む	る
“Can do” form uses	え	け	げ	せ	て	ね	べ	め	れ

Every group, in one table

Group	Dictionary form		“Can do” form	Meaning
Group 1 godan	使う *tsukau*	→	使える *tsukaeru*	can use
	聞く *kiku*	→	聞ける *kikeru*	can listen
	泳ぐ *oyogu*	→	泳げる *oyogeru*	can swim
	貸す *kasu*	→	貸せる *kaseru*	can lend
	飲む *nomu*	→	飲める *nomeru*	can drink
	作る *tsukuru*	→	作れる *tsukureru*	can make
Group 2 ichidan	開ける *akeru*	→	開けられる *akerareru*	can open
	起きる *okiru*	→	起きられる *okirareru*	can get up
Group 3 irregular	する *suru*	→	できる *dekiru*	can do
	来る *kuru*	→	来られる *korareru*	can come

The object particle changes: を becomes が

Plain sentence	“Can do” sentence
日本語**を**話します — I speak Japanese	日本語**が**話せます — I can speak Japanese

Use it

～ます politely — 泳げます

～ません cannot — 飲めません

～ようになりました became able to — 読めるようになりました

～ことができます the longer way — 泳ぐことができます

まだ～ません not yet able — まだ書けません

～から because I can — 使えるから

Watch out

Dropping ら is casual speech. People say 開けれる and 起きれる, but write 開けられる.

Ability is not the same as “it happens”. 聞ける = I am able to listen; 聞こえる = I can hear it whether I try or not. Same for 見られる and 見える.

Two things you get free

Every “can do” verb is a Group 2 verb. They all end in る after an **e** sound, so 飲める → 飲めます・飲めない・飲めた follow the Group 2 rules you already know.

A polite refusal. ちょっと飲めません is a softer “no” than saying you do not want to.

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