MODAL VERBS OF ABILITY

CEFR Level B2 — Upper-Intermediate

English Language Worksheets | 4 Worksheets + Answer Key

Worksheet 1: Perfect Modals of Ability

could have done — the ability that was never used.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — **Look and learn**

Form	Meaning	Example
could have + past part.	had the ability but did not do it	I could have gone, but I stayed home.
couldn't have + past part.	it was impossible	She couldn't have known — nobody told her.
was able to + verb	had the ability AND did it	He was able to escape through the window.
might have been able to	hedged past possibility	We might have been able to help, had we known.
needn't have + past part.	did it, but it was unnecessary	You needn't have waited for me.

*Key contrast: **could have done** = the chance existed, unused. **was able to do** = the thing actually happened.*

PART B — **Choose the correct form**

Underline the correct option.

1. The exit was blocked, but somehow he (could have escaped / was able to escape).
2. You (could have told / were able to tell) me — I would have helped!
3. She (couldn't have seen / wasn't able to see) him; she was abroad that week.
4. With more time we (could have finished / were able to finish), but the deadline came.
5. After the surgery she (could have walked / was able to walk) again within a month.
6. He (couldn't have known / wasn't able to know) the file was confidential.

PART C — **What does it imply?**

Explain what each sentence tells us about what actually happened.

1. “She could have won the race.”
   Implies: _____
2. “She was able to win the race.”
   Implies: _____
3. “He couldn't have finished it alone.”
   Implies: _____

Score: _____ / 12

Worksheet 2: The Ability–Possibility Boundary

When 'can' stops meaning 'is able to'.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — **Look and learn**

Sentence	Meaning	Type
Snow can fall in May.	it sometimes happens	theoretical possibility
It could rain later.	it is possible	specific possibility
He can be very rude.	he sometimes is	characteristic behaviour
He could be at home.	perhaps he is	speculation
She can lift 80 kg.	she has the strength	ability
That can't be true.	it is impossible	logical deduction

*Note! **can** = general/theoretical possibility. **could / may / might** = a specific possibility now. **can't** = logical impossibility.*

Label each sentence: ABILITY, THEORETICAL POSSIBILITY, SPECIFIC POSSIBILITY or DEDUCTION.

1. The lift can't be working — there's a notice on it. → _____
2. Wolves can travel forty miles in a night. → _____
3. Take an umbrella; it could rain this afternoon. → _____
4. Winters here can be extremely harsh. → _____
5. She can read Japanese fluently. → _____
6. He can't have left — his coat is still here. → _____

PART B — **Disambiguate**

Each sentence has two possible meanings. Explain both, then rewrite to make each meaning clear.

1. “She can be difficult.”
   Meaning A: _____
   Meaning B: _____
2. “You can't finish that in an hour.”
   Meaning A: _____
   Meaning B: _____

Score: _____ / 10

Worksheet 3: Register, Hedging & Transformation

Ability modals in formal and diplomatic language.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — The register spectrum

Informal	Neutral	Formal
I can't do that.	I'm not able to do that.	I am not in a position to do that.
Can you help?	Could you help?	Would you be able to assist?
She's good at maths.	She can do maths well.	She has considerable aptitude for maths.
We couldn't fix it.	We weren't able to fix it.	We were unable to resolve the issue.

Rewrite each sentence in the register indicated.

1. We couldn't meet the deadline. *(formal)*
   → _____
2. The applicant has the ability to work independently. *(informal)*
   → _____
3. Can you send me the file? *(formal, polite)*
   → _____
4. I'm not in a position to comment. *(informal)*
   → _____

PART B — Sentence transformation

Rewrite each sentence using the word in brackets. Do not change the meaning.

1. It was impossible for her to have seen the accident. *(couldn't)*
   → _____
2. He had the chance to apologise, but he didn't. *(could have)*
   → _____
3. After weeks of effort, they eventually opened the safe. *(succeeded)*
   → _____
4. She has the capacity to handle enormous pressure. *(capable)*
   → _____
5. Unfortunately I won't have the ability to attend. *(be able)*
   → _____

Score: _____ / 13

Worksheet 4: Reading & Writing

Ability, blame and the unused opportunity.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — **Analytical reading**

> *The engineers could have prevented the collapse. They had the data; they were capable of reading it; and three of them managed to raise concerns in writing. What they were not able to do was persuade anyone above them. 'We couldn't have known the exact date,' one told the inquiry, 'but we could see the direction of travel.' The board, meanwhile, maintained that it could not have acted on evidence it had never been shown — a defence that would carry more weight if the memos had not been addressed to it.*

1. Identify SIX ability structures and name each.

_____

_____

_____

2. 'The engineers could have prevented the collapse.' What does this tell us about what happened, and what does it imply about blame?

_____

_____

3. Contrast 'We couldn't have known the exact date' with 'we could see the direction of travel'. Why is 'could see' used, not 'were able to see'?

_____

_____

4. 'it could not have acted on evidence it had never been shown' — analyse this as a defence. What does the final clause do to it?

_____

_____

PART B — **Write an account**

Write an account (120–150 words) of a preventable failure. Include: ONE 'could have + past participle', ONE 'couldn't have', ONE 'was/were able to' for an actual success, ONE 'manage to' or 'succeed in', and ONE formal ability phrase. Underline and label each.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Word count: _____ Structures labelled: _____ / 5

Score: _____ / 17

ANSWER KEY & TEACHER NOTES

For teacher use only — B2 Level Worksheets

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Worksheet 1 – Perfect Modals

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
B	Choices 1–6	**1 was able to escape, 2 could have told, 3 couldn't have seen, 4 could have finished, 5 was able to walk, 6 couldn't have known**
C1	could have won	**She did not win. She had the ability, but the chance went unused.**
C2	was able to win	**She did win. The ability was exercised successfully.**
C3	couldn't have finished it alone	**He did not do it alone; the speaker deduces that help must have been involved. It states impossibility, not a missed chance.**

Worksheet 2 – Ability vs Possibility

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
A	Labels 1–6	**1 DEDUCTION, 2 ABILITY (also accept theoretical possibility), 3 SPECIFIC POSSIBILITY, 4 THEORETICAL POSSIBILITY, 5 ABILITY, 6 DEDUCTION**
B1	She can be difficult.	**A: ability/characteristic — 'She is sometimes difficult.' B: capacity — 'She has the capability to be difficult (if she chooses).' Rewrite A: 'She is sometimes difficult.' Rewrite B: 'She is capable of being difficult.'**
B2	You can't finish that in an hour.	**A: ability — 'You are not able to.' B: deduction — 'It is impossible that you will.' Rewrite A: 'You won't be able to finish that in an hour.' Rewrite B: 'There's no way that can be finished in an hour.'**

Worksheet 3 – Register & Transformation

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
A1	formal	**We were unable to meet the deadline.**
A2	informal	**The applicant can work on their own.**
A3	formal, polite	**Would you be able to send me the file?**
A4	informal	**I can't say anything about it.**
B1	couldn't	**She couldn't have seen the accident.**
B2	could have	**He could have apologised, but he didn't.**
B3	succeeded	**After weeks of effort, they eventually succeeded in opening the safe.**
B4	capable	**She is capable of handling enormous pressure.**
B5	be able	**Unfortunately I won't be able to attend.**

Worksheet 4 – Reading & Writing

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
A1	Six structures	**‘could have prevented’ (perfect modal, unused ability); ‘were capable of reading it’ (capable of + -ing); ‘managed to raise concerns’ (single success); ‘were not able to do’ (inability); ‘couldn't have known’ (past impossibility); ‘could see’ (perception verb); ‘could not have acted’ (past impossibility)**
A2	‘could have prevented’	**It tells us the collapse was NOT prevented, while asserting that the engineers possessed the ability to prevent it. The gap between capacity and outcome is precisely where blame settles — the modal convicts without accusing.**
A3	‘couldn't have known’ vs ‘could see’	**The first denies the possibility of precise foreknowledge; the second concedes general perception. ‘See’ is a verb of perception, which takes ‘could’ even for a specific occasion — ‘were able to see’ would sound unnatural. The pairing concedes a little to defend a lot.**
A4	the board's defence	**‘Could not have acted’ claims past impossibility: no evidence, therefore no capacity to act. The final clause destroys it by supplying the missing premise — the memos were addressed to the board — so the impossibility was self-inflicted. The syntax grants the defence, then withdraws its foundation.**
B	Account (120–150 words)	**Up to 10 marks: 5 for the five required structures used and labelled correctly, 3 for argument and register, 2 for accuracy.**