MODAL VERBS OF ABILITY

CEFR Level C2 — Mastery

English Language Worksheets | 4 Worksheets + Answer Key

Worksheet 1: The Ability Modal as a Rhetorical Instrument

At C2, the modal decides where responsibility settles.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

Rhetorical uses of ability modals

Device	Effect	Example
counterfactual indictment	'could have' convicts without accusing	"They could have saved every one of them."
bounded denial	Deny one precise capacity; stay silent on others	"We had no power to compel disclosure."
the exculpatory passive	Remove the agent who lacked the ability	"It was not found possible to intervene."
accumulating capacities	Stack abilities to make inaction absurd	"They had the data, the powers, the staff, the warning."
'unable' vs 'failed'	'Unable' mitigates; 'failed' imputes duty	"They failed to act." vs "They were unable to act."
ironic capability	Praise a capacity to condemn its use	"He is perfectly capable of reading a balance sheet."
modal anticlimax	A grand capacity, a trivial exercise	"With all the powers of the state, it managed a leaflet."

PART A — **Identify the device**

Name the device in each sentence and explain its rhetorical effect in context.

1. "The minister is, we are assured, perfectly capable of reading a two-page summary."
Context: a satirical column

Device: _____ Effect: _____

2. "It was not found possible, on the evidence then available, to take further action."
Context: an official report

Device: _____ Effect: _____

3. "They had the warning, the powers, the money, the staff and the time — and they filed it."
Context: an investigative history

Device: _____ Effect: _____

4. "The department did not fail to act; it was unable to act. There is, it insists, a difference."
Context: a newspaper leader

Device: _____ Effect: _____

PART B — **Transform for effect**

Rewrite each sentence using the device indicated. The effect must be deliberate.

1 Original: “The council had the power to close the building but did not.”
Device: counterfactual indictment
→ _____

2 Original: “Nobody in the ministry stopped the shipment.”
Device: the exculpatory passive
→ _____

3 Original: “They had every resource and achieved nothing.”
Device: accumulating capacities + modal anticlimax
→ _____

Score: _____ / 14

Worksheet 2: Precision — Scope, Knowledge & Capacity

Mastery means separating what one could do from what one knew.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — **Study the distinctions**

Contrast	Distinction
could have vs might have been able to	asserted capacity vs hedged, doubtful capacity
couldn't have vs didn't	impossibility vs mere non-occurrence
unable to vs failed to	no capacity vs unmet duty (fault imputed)
capacity vs knowledge	one may be able to act yet not know one should
scope of negation	‘could not have known everything’ ≠ ‘could have known nothing’

Precision cloze: complete each sentence with the ONE form whose logic and register fit exactly.

1. Had the memo reached her, she _____ have been able to intervene.
2. He _____ have signed it: he was in hospital that week.
3. The trustees did not merely fail to act; they were _____ to act.
4. Not once _____ the regulator able to compel a single disclosure.
5. The agency possessed the _____ but not the will to intervene.
6. She _____ see, even from the corridor, that the door had been forced.
7. The firm _____ in a position to comment while proceedings continue.
8. They _____ to identify the cause after eleven months of testing.

PART B — **Resolve the ambiguity**

Each sentence is ambiguous or misleading. Explain the problem, then rewrite it twice — once for each reading.

1. “The board could not have known everything.”
   Problem: _____
   Reading A: _____
   Reading B: _____
2. “She couldn't help him.”
   Problem: _____
   Reading A: _____
   Reading B: _____
3. “They were unable to prevent the disaster.” (as a defence)
   Problem: _____
   Reading A: _____
   Reading B: _____

Score: _____ / 14

Worksheet 3: Style Analysis & Rewriting

How the modal of ability carries judgement.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — **Analytical reading**

> *The commission's language is a study in bounded denial. It could not, it explains, have compelled the contractor to disclose the test results; nor was it able to inspect the premises without notice. Both statements are true. Neither is responsive. What the commission could have done — what any of its four inspectors was perfectly capable of doing — was ask. It had the telephone numbers. It had, on eleven occasions, the opportunity. Not once was a question put. The report does not say the commission failed; it says the commission was unable. With all the powers of a statutory regulator, it managed to send a letter.*

1. Identify SIX ability structures and name each.

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain 'Both statements are true. Neither is responsive.' in terms of the scope of the denied capacity.

_____

_____

3. 'The report does not say the commission failed; it says the commission was unable.' Analyse the distinction the report is exploiting.

_____

_____

4. Analyse the final sentence. Name the device and explain how the contrast is built.

_____

_____

PART B — **Neutralise the style**

Rewrite the passage's content as three neutral sentences of factual reporting, stripping every rhetorical modal. Then note in one sentence what the commission's own phrasing concealed.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What was concealed: _____

Score: _____ / 16

Worksheet 4: Extended Writing — The Architecture of Capacity

Deploy the full repertoire with deliberate, controlled effect.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A **The task**

Write a persuasive, investigative or satirical passage (200–250 words) on a subject of your choosing. Requirements: at least SIX distinct ability structures, of which at least ONE counterfactual indictment and ONE bounded denial; a consistent register. Underline and label each.

Self-check before submitting	✓
Six or more distinct ability structures, each labelled	
At least one counterfactual ‘could have + past participle’	
At least one bounded denial (a precisely limited ‘could not’)	
‘Unable’ and ‘failed’ used with their distinct implications	
No could/was-able-to confusion for single past successes	
Complementation correct: manage to, succeed in, capable of	

Word count: _____ Structures labelled: _____ / 6

Score: _____ / 35

ANSWER KEY & TEACHER NOTES

For teacher use only — C2 Level Worksheets

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Worksheet 1 – Rhetorical Devices

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
A1	'perfectly capable of reading a two-page summary'	**Ironic capability + modal anticlimax — the capacity conceded is so trivial that granting it is an insult; 'we are assured' attributes the claim elsewhere, so the writer sneers without asserting**
A2	'It was not found possible …'	**The exculpatory passive — no agent appears to have lacked the ability; impossibility is presented as a discovery rather than a choice, and 'on the evidence then available' bounds the denial in advance**
A3	'the warning, the powers, the money, the staff and the time — and they filed it'	**Accumulating capacities + anticlimax — the polysyndetic list makes inaction progressively less defensible; the deflating main clause lands the verdict**
A4	'did not fail to act; it was unable to act'	**The 'unable'/'failed' distinction, quoted to be mocked — 'There is, it insists, a difference' concedes the grammar while withdrawing belief in the substance**
B1	counterfactual indictment	**e.g. 'The council could have closed the building. It did not.'**
B2	exculpatory passive	**e.g. 'It was not found possible to halt the shipment.'**
B3	accumulation + anticlimax	**e.g. 'They had the money, the staff, the mandate and the years — and they produced a summary.'**

Worksheet 2 – Precision & Ambiguity

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
A	Gaps 1–8 in order	**1 might, 2 couldn't, 3 unable, 4 was, 5 capacity, 6 could, 7 is not, 8 succeeded (in identifying) / managed**
B1	scope of negation	**'Could not have known everything' denies total knowledge, not partial knowledge — a trivially true claim used as though it were exculpatory. A: 'The board could not have known every detail.' (true, irrelevant) B: 'The board could have known nothing at all.' (false, and the claim it wants heard)**
B2	lexical ambiguity of 'help'	**'Could not help him' = was unable to assist, OR could not prevent herself. A: 'She was unable to assist him.' B: 'She could not stop herself from helping him.' (or '… could not avoid it')**
B3	'unable' as a defence	**It asserts absence of capacity but does not say whether the attempt was made, or whether the incapacity was self-created. A: 'They tried to prevent it and could not.' B: 'They had divested themselves of the power to prevent it.'**

Worksheet 3 – Style Analysis

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
Q1	Six structures	**‘could not … have compelled’ (bounded denial); ‘nor was it able to inspect’ (inversion + inability); ‘could have done’ (counterfactual indictment); ‘was perfectly capable of doing’ (capable of + -ing, ironic); ‘Not once was a question put’ (inversion, agentless passive); ‘does not say … failed; it says … was unable’ (the unable/failed distinction); ‘it managed to send a letter’ (modal anticlimax)**
Q2	true but not responsive	**Each denial is bounded to one specific capacity — compulsion, and inspection without notice. Both were genuinely absent. But neither bears on the capacity actually at issue, which was the capacity to ask. A precisely true statement about the wrong power leaves the right one unexamined**
Q3	‘failed’ vs ‘was unable’	**‘Failed’ presupposes a duty and imputes fault; ‘was unable’ asserts absence of capacity and carries no blame. The report substitutes the second for the first, converting a dereliction into a misfortune — a lexical choice doing the work of an exoneration**
Q4	the final sentence	**Modal anticlimax. ‘With all the powers of a statutory regulator’ accumulates capacity in a fronted adverbial; ‘managed to’ — a verb reserved for success against difficulty — is then attached to ‘send a letter’. The mismatch between the capacity invoked and the achievement reported is the whole judgement**
B	Neutral rewrite	**e.g. ‘The commission had no power to compel disclosure or to inspect without notice. Its inspectors had the contractor's telephone numbers and eleven opportunities to make contact. They asked no questions and sent one letter.’ Concealed: that asking required no special power at all**

Worksheet 4 – Extended Writing Rubric

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Structural range	Six or more distinct ability structures, deliberately deployed and labelled	0–8
Advanced structures	Counterfactual indictment + bounded denial, both effective	0–8
Register & control	Register sustained; capacity, knowledge and duty kept distinct	0–7
Accuracy	Modal choice, complementation and scope of negation all error-free	0–6
Effect	The passage genuinely persuades or amuses; modality earns its place	0–6