MODAL VERBS OF ABILITY

CEFR Level C1 — Advanced

English Language Worksheets | 4 Worksheets + Answer Key

Worksheet 1: Advanced Structures of Ability

At C1, can/could are assumed. Focus: counterfactuals, hedging, nominalisation.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

Key structures at C1

Structure	Function & Notes	Example
could have + past part.	Counterfactual: capacity existed, unexercised	“The regulator could have intervened.”
couldn't have + past part.	Past impossibility; a defence	“She couldn't have known.”
might have been able to	Doubly hedged counterfactual	“We might have been able to intervene.”
be in a position to	Formal; ability constrained by circumstance	“I am not in a position to comment.”
nominalised ability	capacity, capability, competence, wherewithal	“The capacity to act was never lacking.”
‘could’ with perception verbs	see, hear, feel, understand — even for one occasion	“I could see the flaw at once.”
inversion after ‘not once’	Emphatic denial of exercised ability	“Not once was he able to justify it.”
ability under negation	‘failed to’, ‘proved unable to’ — imputes fault	“The board proved unable to act.”

PART A — **Complete the sentences**

Fill in each gap with an appropriate word or phrase. More than one answer may be possible.

1. The ministry _____ have acted on the warnings; it chose not to.
2. I regret that I am not in a _____ to disclose the figures.
3. Not once _____ the witness able to explain the discrepancy.
4. She _____ have foreseen the collapse — the data were withheld from her.
5. The company lacked neither the _____ nor the funds to comply.
6. Had we been told earlier, we _____ have been able to help.
7. The auditors _____ unable to reconcile the accounts.
8. Even from the doorway I _____ see that the safe had been forced.

PART B — **Error analysis**

Identify and correct the error in each sentence. Then note the rule violated.

1 “After three hours of negotiation, they could finally reach an agreement.”
Correction: _____
Rule: _____

2 “The committee succeeded to identify the cause.”
Correction: _____
Rule: _____

3 “She is capable to manage a department of two hundred.”
Correction: _____
Rule: _____

4 “Next quarter the firm can meet its obligations.” (future ability)
Correction: _____
Rule: _____

Score: _____ / 20

Worksheet 2: Register, Implicature & Blame

What an ability modal asserts, and what it lets the reader infer.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — **The register spectrum**

Ability is expressed very differently across registers. Study the tables.

Informal	Neutral	Formal / institutional
we couldn't sort it out	we weren't able to resolve it	the matter proved incapable of resolution
she's brilliant at this	she can do this very well	she demonstrates exceptional competence
they could've stopped it	they were able to prevent it	intervention lay within their power
I can't say	I'm not able to comment	I am not in a position to comment

Form	What it asserts	What it implicates
could have prevented it	the capacity existed	it was not prevented: blame
couldn't have prevented it	no capacity existed	exculpation; no blame attaches
was unable to prevent it	the attempt failed	the attempt was made: partial defence
failed to prevent it	prevention did not occur	it was a duty: fault

PART B — **Register transformation**

Rewrite each sentence in the register indicated.

1. They could've stopped the leak but they didn't bother. *(formal, institutional)*
   → _____
2. The department was not in a position to intervene. *(informal)*
   → _____
3. He can explain complex ideas simply. *(formal, nominalised)*
   → _____
4. We weren't able to reach a decision. *(formal, with 'prove')*
   → _____

PART C — **Verdicts**

Decide whether each sentence is (a) standard, (b) acceptable but marked/stylistic, or (c) a genuine error. Justify in one sentence.

1. "Despite the fog, the pilot could land the aircraft safely."
   Verdict: (a)/(b)/(c) Justification: _____
2. "Not once was she able to substantiate the claim."
   Verdict: (a)/(b)/(c) Justification: _____

3	“The board regrets that it was unable to have prevented the loss.” Verdict: (a)/(b)/(c) Justification: _____
4	“I could smell smoke the moment I opened the door.” Verdict: (a)/(b)/(c) Justification: _____
5	“She managed to being promoted within a year.” Verdict: (a)/(b)/(c) Justification: _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 3: Academic Writing & Critical Analysis

How the modal of ability assigns responsibility.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — **Analytical reading**

> *No sentence in the language distributes blame so efficiently as 'they could have acted'. It asserts a capacity and, in the same breath, reports that the capacity went unused; the reader convicts, and the writer has accused nobody. Compare the institutional preference for 'we were unable to act', which concedes the outcome while implying an attempt, and 'we could not have acted', which denies the capacity altogether and is therefore the only one of the three that constitutes a defence. The more precisely a public body specifies what it could not do, the more carefully one should read what it does not say it could. 'We had no power to compel disclosure' may be perfectly true — and perfectly silent on whether disclosure was ever requested.*

1. Identify SIX ability structures and name each.

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain the writer's distinction between 'could have acted', 'were unable to act' and 'could not have acted'.

_____

_____

_____

3. 'the reader convicts, and the writer has accused nobody' — explain this in terms of assertion and implicature.

_____

_____

4. Analyse the final sentence. Why is 'perfectly true' compatible with 'perfectly silent'?

_____

_____

PART B — **Sentence transformation**

Rewrite each sentence according to the instruction. Preserve the meaning.

1. Original: "The agency had the power to intervene but did not use it."
   Task: rewrite with a perfect modal of ability.
   → _____

2. Original: "It was impossible for the auditors to detect the fraud."
   Task: rewrite with 'couldn't have'.
   → _____

3. Original: "They never once justified the expenditure."
   Task: front the negative adverbial with inversion and an ability modal.
   → _____

4 Original: “The firm can pay its debts. This has been true throughout.”
Task: nominalise the ability.
→ _____

5 Original: “After a long delay, the negotiators reached an agreement.”
Task: rewrite with ‘succeed in’, then again with ‘be able to’. Which is more formal?
→ _____

PART C — Guided essay paragraph

Write a paragraph of 120–150 words arguing ONE position below. Include at least FOUR distinct structures from Worksheets 1–2; keep the register formal-academic.

Position A: ‘Could have’ is the most damning construction available to a critic.
Position B: Capacity without foreknowledge is not culpability; ‘could have’ is unjust.

My position: ___ A ___ B

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Word count: _____

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 4: Synthesis, Data Interpretation & Argumentation

Deploy ability structures to interpret evidence and rebut claims.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

PART A — **Interpreting complex data**

Study the table: five agencies and their response to an identical early warning. 'Powers' = whether the agency had legal authority to act.

Agency	Warning received	Powers to act	Acted	Days to respond	Outcome score
Alpha	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	82
Bravo	Yes	Yes	No	—	31
Charlie	No	Yes	No	—	38
Delta	Yes	No	No	—	44
Echo	Yes	Yes	Yes	26	57

Write six analytical sentences using the data. Apply the constraints below.

1. [Use 'could have + past participle' to assign blame.]

_____

_____

2. [Use 'couldn't have' to exculpate one agency.]

_____

_____

3. [Use 'was/were able to' for an actual success.]

_____

_____

4. [Use a fronted negative adverbial with inversion.]

_____

_____

5. [Use a nominalised ability (capacity, competence, wherewithal).]

_____

_____

6. [Acknowledge a limitation, using 'not in a position to' or a hedged modal.]

_____

_____

PART B — **Adversarial comparison (debate format)**

Write a two-sentence counter-argument that concedes part of each claim but challenges it from another angle. Use formal register and at least one advanced ability structure per response.

1. Claim: "Bravo is plainly the most culpable: it was warned, it had the powers, and it did nothing."

Hint: consider what the outcome score alone cannot tell us.

Counter-argument:

_____

_____

2. Claim: “Delta cannot be blamed, since it lacked the powers to act.”
Hint: could it have sought those powers, or passed the warning on?

Counter-argument:

_____

_____

3. Claim: “Echo acted, so Echo discharged its duty.”
Hint: compare its response time with Alpha's.

Counter-argument:

_____

_____

PART C **Extended writing task**

Write a discursive essay introduction (180–220 words) on the proposition below. Use at least FIVE distinct ability structures from this unit (underline them). Maintain a formal-academic register; present the proposition, acknowledge its complexity, and signal your line of argument.

“An institution that could have acted and did not is more culpable than one that acted and failed.”

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Word count: _____ Structures underlined: _____ / 5

Score: _____ / 35

ANSWER KEY & TEACHER NOTES

For teacher use only — C1 Level Worksheets

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Worksheet 1 – Gap Fill

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
1	The ministry ___ have acted	could (counterfactual: capacity unexercised)
2	not in a ___ to disclose	position
3	Not once ___ the witness able	was (inversion after a fronted negative)
4	She ___ have foreseen	couldn't (past impossibility — exculpation)
5	neither the ___ nor the funds	capacity / capability / wherewithal
6	we ___ have been able to help	might / could (hedged counterfactual)
7	The auditors ___ unable to reconcile	proved / were
8	I ___ see that the safe had been forced	could (verb of perception)

Worksheet 1 – Error Analysis

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
1	could finally reach	… they were finally able to reach an agreement. — a single past success takes ‘was/were able to’ or ‘managed to’, not ‘could’
2	succeeded to identify	succeeded in identifying — ‘succeed in’ + -ing
3	capable to manage	capable of managing — ‘capable of’ + -ing
4	the firm can meet	… the firm will be able to meet its obligations. — ‘can’ has no future form

Worksheet 2 – Register & Verdicts

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
B1	formal, institutional	Intervention lay within their power, yet no action was taken. / They possessed the capacity to arrest the leak but declined to exercise it.
B2	informal	The department couldn't step in. / They weren't able to do anything about it.
B3	formal, nominalised	He possesses a notable capacity for explaining complex ideas simply.
B4	formal, with ‘prove’	We proved unable to reach a decision.
C1	the pilot could land	(c) Error — a single past success requires ‘was able to land’ or ‘managed to land’
C2	Not once was she able	(a) Standard — correct inversion after a fronted negative adverbial
C3	was unable to have prevented	(c) Error — double marking of the past: either ‘was unable to prevent’ or ‘could not have prevented’, not both
C4	I could smell smoke	(a) Standard — ‘smell’ is a verb of perception, so ‘could’ is correct even for one occasion

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
C5	managed to being promoted	**(c) Error — ‘manage to’ takes the base form: ‘managed to be promoted’**

Worksheet 3 – Part A (Passage Analysis)

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
Q1	Six structures	**‘they could have acted’ (counterfactual perfect modal); ‘the capacity went unused’ (nominalised ability); ‘we were unable to act’ (failed attempt); ‘we could not have acted’ (past impossibility); ‘what it could not do’ (ability under negation); ‘what it does not say it could’ (ellipted modal); ‘We had no power to compel disclosure’ (nominalised capacity)**
Q2	the three-way distinction	**‘Could have acted’ asserts capacity and reports non-use — it blames. ‘Were unable to act’ concedes the outcome but implies an attempt was made and defeated — it mitigates. ‘Could not have acted’ denies that the capacity ever existed — only this is a true defence, because only this removes the premise on which blame depends.**
Q3	assertion vs implicature	**The sentence asserts only two propositions: that they had the ability, and that they did not act. The inference — that they ought to have acted, and are therefore at fault — is implicated, not stated. The reader supplies the accusation and cannot hold the writer to it.**
Q4	‘perfectly true’ and ‘perfectly silent’	**The claim concerns one specific power (to compel). It is compatible with never having exercised a different power (to request). A precisely bounded denial of capacity leaves everything outside the boundary untouched — the truth of what is said conceals the relevance of what is not.**

Worksheet 3 – Part B (Transformations)

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
1	perfect modal	**The agency could have intervened (but did not).**
2	couldn't have	**The auditors couldn't have detected the fraud.**
3	inversion	**Not once were they able to justify the expenditure.**
4	nominalise	**The firm's capacity to pay its debts has never been in doubt.**
5	succeed in / be able to	**‘After a long delay, the negotiators succeeded in reaching an agreement.’ / ‘… were able to reach an agreement.’ — ‘succeed in’ is the more formal**

Worksheets 3–4: Extended & Creative Tasks — Rubric

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Structural range	Uses 4–5 distinct ability structures accurately	0–4
Register	Consistently formal-academic; modal choice deliberate	0–3
Argumentation	Clear line of argument; modality serves the reasoning	0–3
Accuracy	No could/was-able-to confusion; correct complementation	0–2
Coherence	Capacity, knowledge and duty clearly distinguished	0–3

Worksheet 4 – Part A (Model sentences)

#	Question / Item	Answer / Guidance
1	could have	**Bravo could have acted on the warning it received, yet it did nothing.**
2	couldn't have	**Charlie couldn't have responded to a warning it never received.**
3	was able to	**Alpha was able to act within four days of being warned.**
4	inversion	**Not once was Delta able to exercise powers it did not possess.**
5	nominalised	**Bravo lacked neither the capacity nor the authority to intervene.**
6	limitation	**The table is not in a position to tell us whether Echo's delay reflected caution or incompetence.**