

Prepare for {IELTS}

Video Lessons





GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

Describing ability

USING CAN AND COULD

EXPLANATION

- Candidates often need to refer to **ABILITY** in the IELTS Speaking and Writing Tests.
- There are several ways of referring to **ABILITY** and it is good to understand the differences between them.
- The uses of **can** and **could** often confuse IELTS candidates and the examiner will be impressed if you can use these words correctly.

USES OF CAN

We can use **can** and **can't / cannot / can not** to refer to general or present ability:

- These days, most adults **can use** technology reasonably well.
- I **can** usually **tell** when my brother is lying.
- Although I **can use** a computer, I am not especially familiar with some of the newer systems which your company employs.
- Patients put an unreasonable amount of pressure on their doctors: even well-trained and competent medical staff **cannot** always **diagnose** the conditions which patients have. **(General ability)**
- I **can pay** you the money I owe you at the weekend. I **can't** really **pay** you now. I hope that isn't a problem. **(Present ability)**

USES OF COULD

We can use **could / couldn't / could not** to refer to ability in the past:

- Even before the development of widely-understood writing systems, communities **could** still **trade** with each other by bartering.
- Before the development of social media, those living in one place **could not** simply **tap** a screen and contact a friend, family member or colleague on the other side of the world.

We can use **was/were able to** to refer to an ability to complete a single action in the past, but either form is possible in negative sentences:

- Even though I was tired, I **was able to complete** the race.
- Even though I was fit, I **was unable to complete / could not complete** the race.

USES OF COULD

We can use **could + infinitive** for present meaning when there is a condition:

- **Could** you **organise** a party? (if somebody asked you)
- **Could** you **swim** across that river? (if you wanted to; if you had to)

We can use **could have + past participle** for past meaning when there is a condition:

- **Could** you **have done** any better than the last President? (if you had been in his/her position)
- Many people **could have achieved** better grades at school (if they had tried harder; if they had had better teachers)

USES OF COULD

We also use **could** to describe general ability in conditional sentences:

- If I **could swim**, I would be delighted.
- If I **could play** chess as well as my brother, I might try to become a professional chess-player.

We can use **could have** to describe past ability in conditional sentences:

- If I **could have spoken** English when I was at school, I would probably have applied to a university in The USA or Canada.
- If I **could have passed** my exam last year, I would be studying at university now.

USES OF **COULD**

We can use **could** to make requests:

- **Could** you **give** me a hand with my dissertation?
- **Could** you **help** me move all my stuff at the end of the week?
- **Could** you **lend** me some money until the weekend?
- **Could** you **pop** over this evening and bring that book I lent you?
- **Could** you **send** the laptop and documents to my home address?
- I wonder if you **could give** me a hand with this maths question.
- I would be really grateful if you **could check** my report before I send it to the boss.
- It would be beneficial if you **could give** more feedback.

USES OF COULD

We can use **could have + past participle** to describe something which we had the ability to do in the past but which we did not do:

- Why didn't you tell me you were arriving yesterday? I **could have come** to the airport to meet you.
- I'm sorry I didn't know you were struggling so much with your dissertation. I **could have given** you a hand last weekend.

The negative form describes something which we did not have the ability to do in the past:

- I **couldn't have done** much to help you. I was in Australia all of last week.
- I **couldn't have come** to the wedding. Nobody told me about it!



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GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

Describing ability

USING TO BE ABLE TO

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EXPLANATION

- Candidates often need to refer to **ABILITY** in the IELTS Speaking and Writing Tests.
- There are several ways of referring to **ABILITY** and it is good to understand the differences between them.
- The structure **to be able/unable to** is very flexible and can be used in many different tenses.
- **To be able to** is often more formal and complex than **can** and it is more likely to be correct than **can**

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** is possible in the present tense:

- A friend of mine claims that she **is able to detect** lies.
- When they work together, human beings **are able to accomplish** the most wonderful things.
- Many gifted linguists **are able to speak** a range of languages.
However, most of us **are unable to communicate** in more than one or two.
- Schools **might/may be able to improve** their pupils' grades by making sure the children have a nutritious meal before the lessons.
- Parents **should be able to make** their children behave well without having to use physical punishment.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** is possible in past tenses:

- As a child I **was able to work** quickly but **unable to concentrate** for long periods of time.
- They **were unable to come** because of the poor weather.
- Although humans **were able to travel** around the world in the past, they **were not able to get** from one place to another in the amazingly short time periods we are used to.
- Older members of society, who **used to be able to participate** fully and lead active lives, may now be frustrated as they find themselves having less energy to contribute.
- Schoolchildren **didn't use to be able to choose** which subjects they studied.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** is possible in the present perfect tense:

- Some fortunate individuals **have** always **been able to paint**. For them, art seems to be a natural talent. However, for most of us, becoming a competent artist requires dedication and commitment over a number of years.
- Some people **have** never **been able to understand** why others act selfishly, aggressively or unkindly.
- I still **haven't been able to work out** where he actually lives.
- She **has been unable to visit** recently because she broke her leg while on holiday.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** is possible in other perfect tenses:

- Before arriving in The UK, I **had** never **been able to understand** why British people get so excited when the sun comes out.
- Before I learnt some techniques to improve my study skills, I **hadn't been able to concentrate** when writing essays.
- I was delighted when we bumped into each other at the train station. I had been looking for you for months and **had been unable to get** hold of you.
- By the time this course ends, we **will/might have been able to complete** all of the tasks.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** is possible in future tenses:

- It is predicted that by the year 2050 we **will be able to speak** any language we want by simply downloading the relevant information to our brain. This idea is dismissed by others as being far-fetched.
- I fervently hope that, in the future, we **will be able to reduce** our carbon emissions and save the planet from disaster.
- Unless we make fundamental changes to the way we live, future generations **will be unable to deal** with the enormous climate changes they will face.
- I **will/might be unable to come** to the party.
- She **is going/hoping/expecting to be able to come**.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** is possible in conditional sentences:

- If I **am able to come**, I will bring the book you lent me.
- If you need money, I **will/might be able to help**.
- If I had more money, I **would be able to afford** a luxury holiday.
- People would enjoy their retirement more if they **were able to save** money during their working lives.
- If I **had been able to vote** in the last election, I would certainly have supported the main opposition party.
- If I **had been able to go** to university, I **would have been able to get** a well-paid job by now.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

We can use infinitive and gerund forms of **to be able to**:

- I **hope/expect** **to be able to** get a good job when I graduate.
- I **would like/love** **to be able to** dance well.
- **It's** definitely **worth** **being able to do** mental arithmetic.
- I am worried **about** not **being able to cope with** the pressure in my new job.
- **By** **being able to use** the latest technology, youngsters make themselves far more employable.
- **As well as** **being able to swim**, penguins can also walk.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** with other modal verbs is possible:

- As a society, we **need to be able to ensure** that nobody goes hungry.
- We **have to be able to live** with our fellow-humans in a relatively harmonious way.
- We **ought to be able to live** happily without destroying the planet.
- I believe that anyone migrating to another country **should be able to use** the language most widely spoken there.
- You **must be able to dance**. Everybody can!
- If you ask your mum nicely, you **might/may be able to persuade** her to let you go to the party.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** with modal verbs to refer to the future is possible:

- You **will have/need to be able to speak** Spanish by the end of the year. If you go to study in Madrid and don't understand the lectures, it will be a disaster.
- We **should be able to catch / ought to be able to catch** that train. It doesn't leave for another hour, and it is only a twenty-minute walk to the train station from here.
- I **might/may be able to give** you a hand with your homework next weekend.

HOW TO USE **TO BE ABLE TO**

Using **to be able/unable to** with modal verbs to refer to the past is possible:

- Everyone on the programme **had/needed to be able to speak** Thai.
- As a species, we **should have been able to realise** years ago that urgent action was needed to deal with the issue of pollution.
- I agree that we **ought to have been able to find** a solution.
- I don't think there were any translators present at the meeting. Everybody there **must have been able to speak** English.
- I wish we had known you were coming. We **might/may have been able to help** you.
- We **might have managed to complete / succeeded in completing** the test, but we ran out of time.



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GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

Describing ability

**USING TO MANAGE AND TO
SUCCEED**

EXPLANATION

- Candidates often need to refer to **ABILITY** in the IELTS Speaking and Writing Tests.
- There are several ways of referring to **ABILITY** and it is good to understand the differences between them.
- The examiner will also be impressed by candidates who use **to manage** and **to succeed** for **ABILITY**.

HOW TO USE **TO MANAGE TO DO SOMETHING**

We can use **to manage to + infinitive** to describe the ability to do something difficult:

- I have a great deal of admiration for air-traffic controllers who **manage to deal with** hundreds of pieces of vital information at the same time.
- I **don't manage to read** as many books as I would like to.
- I **am** just about **managing to cope with** all the work at the moment.
- I **am** not really **managing to eat** as much fruit as I should at the moment.
- I **managed to get** my passport renewed but **didn't manage to get** a visa in time.

HOW TO USE **TO MANAGE TO DO SOMETHING**

- Unfortunately, I **didn't manage to finish** all the preparation before they arrived.
- I **haven managed to finalise** all the arrangements for the wedding.
- I promise I **will manage to get** to the theatre on time. Even if I don't finish work until six o'clock, I will be able to book a taxi.
- I **would** certainly **manage to bring up** my daughter on my own, if I had to.
- I **would have managed to organise** the party if you had let me.
- **By managing to build** my own house, I proved to lots of my friends that I was more competent than they had previously believed.

HOW TO USE **TO SUCCEED IN DOING SOMETHING**

We can use **to succeed in + -ing** to describe the ability to do something which many people cannot do because it is difficult:

- Many entrepreneurs who **succeed in amassing** huge fortunes are actually unhappy in their private lives.
- More than ninety percent of applicants **do not succeed in getting** a place at top-ranking universities.
- I think I **am** slowly **succeeding in convincing** James to come on holiday with us. It's a tough job as he hates flying.
- I finally **succeeded in persuading** him to come to the party.
- Unfortunately, I **didn't succeed in finishing** the marathon.

HOW TO USE TO SUCCEED IN DOING SOMETHING

- I have tried to understand mathematics a million times but I **have** never **succeeded in working** it all **out**.
- I **have** rarely **succeeded in persuading** anyone to buy anything. I'm not a particularly good salesperson.
- I think we **will** eventually **succeed in persuading** everyone.
- I don't think I **would** ever **succeed in building up** a profitable business. You have done an amazing job.
- It's amazing what you did. I **would** never **have succeeded**.
- **By succeeding in making** progress in the world of journalism, she has become a role model to many young women thinking of pursuing a career in the media.



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PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

Complete each sentence with the better option:

EXAMPLE

I **cannot / could not** give you much help today, but I will be free tomorrow.

ANSWER: I cannot give you much help today, but I will be free tomorrow.

1. Trains and buses **cannot / could not** always arrive on time. Sometimes they get delayed.
2. Although most of us **can / could** use technology these days, there are still some people who struggle with it.
3. When I was young, I **can't / couldn't** swim very well.
4. I **could / was able to** get quite a high grade in my exam last week.
5. Do you think you **can / could** lie to your closest friend?
6. I know you didn't get the job, but I don't think you **was able to / could have done** any better.
7. If I **would / could** speak Spanish, I would apply for that job in Seville.
8. If I **can / could** have passed my exams, I might have got a good job.

ANSWERS

1. Trains and buses CANNOT always arrive on time. Sometimes they get delayed.
2. Although most of us CAN use technology these days, there are still some people who struggle with it.
3. When I was young, I COULDN'T swim very well.
4. I WAS ABLE TO get quite a high grade in my exam last week.
5. Do you think you COULD lie to your closest friend?
6. I know you didn't get the job, but I don't think you COULD have done any better.
7. If I COULD speak Spanish, I would apply for that job in Seville.
8. If I COULD have passed my exams, I might have got a good job.

PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

Complete the following sentences with a form of **to be able/unable to**:

1. Improvements in technology mean the fact that many of us a_____ u_____ t_____ speak a foreign language will cease to matter in the not-too-distant future. We w_____ soon b_____ a_____ t_____ use our smartphones to translate everything we want to say.
2. When I was younger, I w_____ u_____ t_____ appreciate the value of money.
3. Many older individuals complain that they u_____ t_____ b_____ a_____ t_____ remember facts and figures without difficulty but that, as they have become older, they have lost this valuable skill.
4. Although some individuals claim t_____ b_____ a_____ t_____ tell when somebody is lying, evidence from psychological experiments suggests that very few of us actually have this skill.
5. The majority of undergraduates hope t_____ b_____ a_____ t_____ get a well-paid job on completing their academic studies.
6. If I w_____ a_____ t_____ develop one super-power, I think I would choose t_____ b_____ a_____ t_____ fly.

ANSWERS

1. Improvements in technology mean the fact that many of us **ARE UNABLE TO** speak a foreign language will cease to matter in the not-too-distant future. We **WILL** soon **BE ABLE TO** use our smartphones to translate everything we want to say.
2. When I was younger, I **WAS UNABLE TO** appreciate the value of money.
3. Many older individuals complain that they **USED TO BE ABLE TO** remember facts and figures without difficulty but that as they have become older, they have lost this valuable skill.
4. Although some individuals claim **TO BE ABLE TO** tell when somebody is lying, evidence from psychological experiments suggests that very few of us actually have this skill.
5. The majority of undergraduates hope **TO BE ABLE TO** get a well-paid job on completing their academic studies.
6. If I **WAS/WERE ABLE TO** develop one super-power, I think I would choose **TO BE ABLE TO** fly.

PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

Complete each sentence with the better option:

EXAMPLE

I **cannot / could not** give you much help today, but I will be free tomorrow.

ANSWER: I **cannot** give you much help today, but I will be free tomorrow.

1. **Couldn't / Could** you give me a hand tomorrow? I'm moving to a new flat and I would really like you to help me carry my stuff.
2. I wish you had told us you were coming. We **can / could** have organised a party.
3. I'm sorry but I'm **inable / unable** to help you.
4. I was trying to listen to the conversation, but I **wasn't able to / wasn't being able to** hear everything they said.
5. I **have never been able to / never have been able to** understand why some people laugh at others' misfortune.
6. By this time next week, I **will / would** be able to repay the money you lent me.
7. Although I eventually managed **to / in** pass my driving test, it took me two years and six attempts.
8. I succeeded **in / to** convincing my boss to give me a pay-rise. I told her how much value my work had added to the company and she eventually agreed.

ANSWERS

1. COULD you give me a hand tomorrow? I'm moving to a new flat and I would really like you to help me carry my stuff.
2. I wish you had told us you were coming. We COULD have organised a party.
3. I'm sorry but I'm UNABLE to help you.
4. I was trying to listen to the conversation, but I WASN'T ABLE TO hear everything they said.
5. I HAVEN NEVER BEEN ABLE to understand why some people laugh at others' misfortune.
6. By this time next week, I WILL be able to repay the money you lent me.
7. Although I eventually managed TO pass my driving test, it took me two years and six attempts.
8. I succeeded IN convincing my boss to give me a pay-rise. I told her how much value my work had added to the company and she eventually agreed.