

Prepare for {IELTS}

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# GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

**Possibility**

USING MODAL VERBS

Prepare for {IELTS}

# EXPLANATION

- It is important to be able to write and speak about **POSSIBILITY**. It is a concept/idea which we often need.
- You can impress the IELTS examiner by using a range of structures in your Writing and Speaking Tests.
- In the Reading and Listening Tests, you will often find language connected to **POSSIBILITY**.
- We can use forms of **may, might, could, can** and **must** to describe **POSSIBILITY**.

# POSSIBILITY

## USING MODAL VERBS

**May, might and could (+ infinitive)** express present or future possibility. There is often not a lot of difference between these modal verbs, but **may** is sometimes more formal than **might**. **Could** is often used when something is less possible/likely:

- We **may** now **be unable to** prevent the deaths of millions of humans as a result of climate change. ( = There is quite a strong possibility)
- Scientists **might** one day **find** a cure for the most serious diseases which affect us. ( = There is quite a strong possibility)
- Face-to-face communication **could** soon **become** a thing of the past. ( = It is possible, but maybe not very likely)

# POSSIBILITY USING MODAL VERBS

We use **can** to express a general possibility:

- It **can be** incredibly difficult to move from the countryside to a city. (= It is often/generally difficult)
- Although salaries in the construction sector **can be** quite high, the work is demanding and dangerous, and hours are long. (= Salaries are often/generally high)
- It **can take** a long time to teach students the fundamentals of algebra, and even longer to make them appreciate how valuable algebra **can be**. (= It often/generally takes a long time; Algebra is often/generally useful)

# POSSIBILITY

## USING MODAL VERBS

We can use **may not** and **might not** to indicate that something is possibly not true:

- It **may/might not be** easy for the parents of large families to give each individual child as much attention as they would like to. (= There is quite a strong possibility that it is not easy)
- It **may/might not be** such a good idea to develop artificial intelligence further, until we fully understand the risks. (= There is quite a strong possibility that it would not be a good idea)
- It **may/might not take** us long to drive to your house. They've just opened that new motorway so, if it isn't too busy, we'll be able to get there in no time at all. (= There is a strong possibility that we will get there quickly)

# POSSIBILITY

## USING MODAL VERBS

We can also use **could not/couldn't**, but with a different meaning, and usually only with comparative adjectives:

- I **could not be happier**. (= It is impossible for me to be happier / I am extremely happy / I am as happy as I can be)
- The situation **could not be more complicated**. (= It is impossible for the situation to be more complicated / The situation is very complicated)
- The solution **could not be simpler**. (= It is impossible for the solution to be simpler / The solution is very simple)
- Those who think that money makes us happy **couldn't be more wrong**. (= It is impossible that they are more wrong)

# POSSIBILITY

## USING MODAL VERBS

We can use **must** when we believe something is definitely true and **cannot** when we believe something is definitely not true. We often (but not always) use **must** and **cannot** with the verb **to be**:

- It **must be** hard to bring up a large family. (= I am sure it is hard)
- It **must take** ages for you to get to work. You live miles away! (= I am sure it takes you a long time)
- It **cannot be** easy to live in a foreign country. (= I am sure that it is not easy)
- It **cannot make** any sense for children to be expelled from school simply as a result of poor behaviour. (= It is impossible that it makes sense / I am sure that it doesn't make sense)



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# GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

**Possibility**

AVOIDING MODAL VERBS

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# EXPLANATION

- It is important to be able to write and speak about **POSSIBILITY**. It is a concept/idea which we often need.
- You can impress the IELTS examiner by using a range of structures in your Writing and Speaking Tests.
- In the Reading and Listening Tests, you will often find language connected to **POSSIBILITY**.
- We can sometimes describe **POSSIBILITY** **without using modal verbs**.

# POSSIBILITY: CERTAINTY

## AVOIDING MODAL VERBS

We can avoid modal verbs to express possibility. Being able to do this is useful because it allows us to avoid repetition:

- **There is no doubt whatsoever that** we will need to find alternatives to carbon-based fuels.
- **It is undoubtedly the case that** the quality of life has risen.
- **Without a shadow of a doubt,** it is becoming increasingly difficult for wild animals to survive in their natural habitats.
- **Undoubtedly,** thanks to the development of social media, youngsters feel under more pressure than their parents or grandparents did.
- It is **certainly not** as difficult as it used to be for young adults to borrow money from financial institutions.

## POSSIBILITY: VERY HIGH

### AVOIDING MODAL VERBS

We can avoid modal verbs to express possibility. Being able to do this is useful because it allows us to avoid repetition:

- **There is little doubt that** traffic congestion will continue to grow.
- **It is almost entirely certain that** China will become the world's leading economic power within our lifetimes.
- **The likelihood/probability that** a motorcyclist will be involved in a serious road-traffic accident **is exceptionally/extremely high**.
- **It is extremely/exceptionally likely/probable that** those who start smoking when young will become ill when older.
- It is **probably** harder to get a decent job these days than it was in previous decades.

# POSSIBILITY: MODERATE

## AVOIDING MODAL VERBS

We can avoid modal verbs to express possibility. Being able to do this is useful because it allows us to avoid repetition:

- **There is a distinct/definite possibility that** natural gas will completely run out during the coming decades.
- **It appears/seems/is quite/relatively likely that** the population will continue to grow.
- The Olympic Games are **possibly** the most popular international sporting event in the world.
- **Maybe** we should all try to be a little bit kinder.

# POSSIBILITY: QUITE LOW

## AVOIDING MODAL VERBS

We can avoid modal verbs to express possibility. Being able to do this is useful because it allows us to avoid repetition:

- **The possibility that** we will one day discover life forms on other planets **should not be entirely discounted.**
- **It is not entirely beyond the realms of possibility that** passports will one day be abolished.
- **It is relatively/quite unlikely that** prices will fall in the coming months.

## POSSIBILITY: VERY LOW

### AVOIDING MODAL VERBS

We can avoid modal verbs to express possibility. Being able to do this is useful because it allows us to avoid repetition:

- **It is almost impossible/inconceivable that** humans who have already been born will live to the age of 200.
- **According to the statistics provided, living standards are extremely/highly/exceptionally unlikely to** rise this decades.
- **There is hardly/barely/scarcely any chance/possibility that** we will manage to completely eradicate infectious disease from our planet.
- **It is almost beyond the realms of possibility that** we will develop the ability to travel through time.

# POSSIBILITY

## AVOIDING MODAL VERBS

We can often use words which refer to frequency to replace modal verbs for possibility. However, the meaning is slightly different:

- In the majority of cases, children who study hard get good exam results.
- It is usually the case that children benefit from playing team-sports.
- Passengers frequently/often become annoyed when trains and buses are delayed.
- It generally/usually/normally takes years of practice to become an accomplished musician.

# POSSIBILITY

## AVOIDING MODAL VERBS

We can often use words which refer to frequency to replace modal verbs for possibility. However, the meaning is slightly different:

- Animals **hardly ever** attack humans unless they have been provoked.
- **Seldom/Rarely** do women get promoted to senior management roles.
- In most countries, lawyers and doctors **tend to** be paid more than teachers.
- She **tends to** exaggerate and he **doesn't tend to** take any notice.
- Most of us **tend not to** believe what we read online.
- People **tended to** trust politicians in the past but **didn't tend to** believe those working in advertising.



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# GRAMMAR FOR IELTS

## Possibility

### DESCRIBING POSSIBILITY IN THE PAST

# EXPLANATION

- It is important to be able to write and speak about **POSSIBILITY**. It is a concept/idea which we often need.
- In the Reading and Listening Tests, you will often find language connected to **POSSIBILITY** in the past.
- If you can describe **POSSIBILITY** in the past in your **Writing and Speaking Tests**, you will impress the IELTS examiner.

# DESCRIBING POSSIBILITY IN THE PAST

We can use **may/might/could + have + past participle** to express uncertainty/possibility about past actions:

**May** is sometimes more formal than **might**, and **could** can sometimes be used when the level of uncertainty is higher:

- It is difficult to know why so many people took up smoking in the past. They **may** simply **have wanted** to fit in with others in their social group. Clever advertising **might have persuaded** them to become a smoker. It is even possible that some young adults **could have thought** that smoking was healthy.

# DESCRIBING POSSIBILITY IN THE PAST

When we want to indicate that something was possible in the past, but did not actually happen, we use **might/may/could + have + past participle**:

- **Why weren't you a bit nicer to her? She's the Managing Director of one of the region's biggest IT companies. She **might/may have offered** you a job. (= The possibility existed for her to offer you a job, but she didn't)**
- **I **could have gone** out last night but I didn't really feel like it. (= I had the possibility/option to go out but I decided to stay at home)**
- **I **could have been** a great footballer, but unfortunately I broke my leg when I was seventeen. (= The possibility existed but never happened)**

# DESCRIBING POSSIBILITY IN THE PAST

We can use **may/might not + have + past participle** to indicate uncertainty/possibility in the past:

- Some of the students **may/might not have had** time to finish their homework. (= It is possible that they didn't have time)
- She **may/might not have understood** what you said. (= There is the possibility that she did not understand)
- The meeting **may/might not have finished** yet. (= It is possible that the meeting has not finished)
- He didn't apply for the job. He **may/might not have been able to** face the prospect of a lengthy commute every morning. (= There is the possibility that he didn't want to face this prospect)

# DESCRIBING POSSIBILITY IN THE PAST

We can often use **could not/couldn't + have + past participle** with comparatives such as **happier** and **better**. It has a past meaning which is different to the past meaning of **might/may not + have + past participle**:

- I **couldn't/could not have been happier**. (= It is impossible that I was happier)
- The movie **couldn't/could not have been more interesting**. (= It is impossible that the movie was more interesting)
- The staff at your hotel **couldn't/could not have been more welcoming**. (= it is impossible that the staff were more welcoming)



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## **PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises**

**Re-arrange the following texts to form sentences which describe possibilities:**

1. can to learn difficult it incredibly new a language be
2. take house to it my can from to where the ages get office work I
3. job a it looking be start new a to might idea for good
4. lecture for to it be the may easy not understand you
5. who be makes not money could mistaken those happy more that us believe
6. your to on own bring family large hard must up a be it
7. easy be it cannot apartment tiny a in living
8. cannot many be children it hungry right so that go

### **ANSWERS**

1. It can be incredibly difficult to learn a new language.
2. It can take ages to get from my house to the office where I work.
3. It might be a good idea to start looking for a new job.
4. It may not be easy for you to understand the lecture.
5. Those who believe that money makes us happy could not be more mistaken.
6. It must be hard to bring up a large family on your own.
7. It cannot be easy living in a tiny apartment.
8. It cannot be right that so many children go hungry.

## PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

Complete the following sentences with phrases which indicate possibility:

EXAMPLE: It is po\_\_\_\_\_ th\_\_\_\_\_ online shopping will one day become more important than shopping in the real world.

ANSWER: It is **possible that** online shopping will one day become more important than shopping in the real world.

1. There is a d\_\_\_\_\_ p\_\_\_\_\_ that all of the arctic summer ice will melt in the not too distant future.
2. It is quite l\_\_\_\_\_ that electric cars will become increasingly common over the coming years.
3. There is h\_\_\_\_\_ any ch\_\_\_\_\_ that an agreement will be reached to decommission all nuclear weapons on the planet.
4. Thanks to the internet, it is undo\_\_\_\_\_ easier to study than it used to be.
5. There is sc\_\_\_\_\_ a ch\_\_\_\_\_ that I have passed the IELTS exam. I completely froze during the speaking test and couldn't even answer the simplest questions.
6. Wi\_\_\_\_\_ a sh\_\_\_\_\_ of a d\_\_\_\_\_, it is becoming increasingly difficult for school-leavers to get a well-paid job.
7. It is usu\_\_\_\_\_ the c\_\_\_\_\_ that children who have a stable upbringing get better exams results at school.
8. The po\_\_\_\_\_ that we will one day discover life forms on other planets remains quite dis\_\_\_\_\_.

### ANSWERS

1. There is a **distinct possibility** that all of the arctic summer ice will melt in the not too distant future.
2. It is quite **likely** that electric cars will become increasingly common over the coming years.
3. There is **hardly any chance** that an agreement will be reached to decommission all nuclear weapons on the planet.
4. Thanks to the internet, it is **undoubtedly** easier to study than it used to be.
5. There is **scarcely a chance** that I have passed the IELTS exam. I completely froze during the speaking test and couldn't even answer the simplest questions.
6. **Without a shadow of a doubt**, it is becoming increasingly difficult for school-leavers to get a well-paid job.
7. **It is usually the case** that children who have a stable upbringing get better exams results at school.
8. The **possibility** that we will one day discover life forms on other planets remains quite **distant**.



## PREPARE for IELTS: Grammar Exercises

Try to re-write the following sentences. They all describe possibility in the past:

EXAMPLE: It is possible that she was tired.

She m\_\_\_\_\_ h\_\_\_\_\_ b\_\_\_\_\_ tired.

ANSWER: She **might have been** tired.

1. It is possible that the people who did not vote in the election thought that voting was a waste of time.  
The people who did not vote in the election c\_\_\_\_\_ h\_\_\_\_\_ th\_\_\_\_\_ that voting was a waste of time.
2. It is possible that she didn't understand what you said.  
She m\_\_\_\_\_ n\_\_\_\_\_ h\_\_\_\_\_ u\_\_\_\_\_ what you said
3. It is possible that she did not have time to finish her work.  
She m\_\_\_\_\_ n\_\_\_\_\_ h\_\_\_\_\_ h\_\_\_\_\_ time to finish her work
4. I was as happy as it is possible to be  
I c\_\_\_\_\_ h\_\_\_\_\_ b\_\_\_\_\_ happier
5. The staff was/were as welcoming as it is possible to be.  
The staff c\_\_\_\_\_ h\_\_\_\_\_ b\_\_\_\_\_ more welcoming.
6. I had the possibility to go out last night but I didn't really want to.  
I c\_\_\_\_\_ h\_\_\_\_\_ g\_\_\_\_\_ out last night but I didn't really want to.

### ANSWERS

1. The people who did not vote in the election **could have thought** that voting was a waste of time.
2. She **might/may not have understood** what you said
3. She **might/may not have had** time to finish her work
4. I **couldn't have been** happier
5. The staff **couldn't have been** more welcoming.
6. I **could have gone** out last night but I didn't really want to.