

ENGLISH MASTERED · MARITIME ENGLISH

Maritime Technical English

Module 4 — Cargo, Claims & Safety

Cargo handling, damage claims, and professional dispute resolution, with a grammar focus on the Past Simple and Past Continuous for describing incidents at sea.

ESP · ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Module Overview

Objective. This module focuses on cargo handling, damage claims, and professional dispute resolution in the maritime industry. You will build vocabulary for different cargo types and damage terminology, and develop the formal communication skills needed to handle claims through phone calls and emails.

By the end, you will be able to describe an incident clearly, notify and respond to a claim in writing, negotiate a settlement diplomatically, and explain cargo-hold safety procedures with confidence.

GRAMMAR FOCUS

Distinguishing between the Past Simple and Past Continuous tenses to describe exactly when and how damage occurred.

IN THIS MODULE

- 1 Cargo types and damage**
Cargo classifications, damage categories, key vocabulary, and the Past Simple / Past Continuous contrast.
- 2 Claims and dispute resolution**
The claims process, professional phone dialogues, negotiation language, and formal email writing.
- 3 Cargo holds and safety**
Hold structures, enclosed-space safety procedures, grammar practice, and writing tasks.

SECTION ONE

Cargo Types and Damage



Types of Cargo

Understanding the different types of cargo is essential for maritime professionals. Each type has specific handling requirements, risks, and documentation needs — affecting everything from vessel selection to insurance and claims procedures.

Dry Bulk Cargo

Unpackaged commodities loaded directly into the holds — grain, coal, iron ore, cement, fertilisers. Measured by weight and carried on specialised bulk carriers.

Liquid Bulk Cargo

Fluids transported in tanks rather than containers: crude oil, petroleum products, chemicals, LNG, and vegetable oils. Carried by purpose-built tankers.

Containerised Cargo

Goods packed in standard containers (TEU/FEU) — electronics, textiles, consumer goods. Container ships offer efficient loading and secure transport.

Break Bulk Cargo

Individual units loaded separately rather than in containers: steel coils, machinery, vehicles, and project cargo. Require careful stowage and specialised handling.

Reefer Cargo

Temperature-controlled goods needing refrigerated containers or vessels — fresh produce, frozen food, pharmaceuticals, and other perishables.

Types of Cargo Damage

Cargo damage can occur at any point during transport. Recognising the different types helps professionals identify causes, assign responsibility, and process claims effectively.

Wet Damage	Water ingress from rain, seawater, condensation, or leaking containers. Often affects dry bulk, paper, and electronics — frequently from improper hatch sealing.
Contamination	Cargo polluted by contact with other substances — cross-contamination between cargoes, residue from previous shipments, or exposure during handling.
Shortage	The quantity delivered is less than the bill of lading states — from theft, miscounting, spillage, or losses during handling.
Physical Damage	Structural damage — dents, tears, crushing, breakage — during loading or discharge, or from improper stowage causing cargo to shift at sea.
Delay-Related Damage	Occurs when cargo arrives late, particularly affecting perishables, time-sensitive materials, or commodities with fluctuating market values.
Temperature Damage	Damage to reefer cargo when temperatures are not maintained — thawing of frozen goods or spoilage of fresh produce.

Key Cargo Vocabulary

Stowage	The arrangement and securing of cargo in a vessel's holds.
Bill of Lading (B/L)	The document acknowledging receipt of cargo for shipment.
Manifest	A detailed list of all cargo carried on a vessel.
Survey	An inspection to assess the condition of cargo or a vessel.
Tally	The count or record of cargo loaded or discharged.
Outturn	The quantity of cargo delivered at the destination.
Pilferage	Theft of small quantities of cargo.
Spillage	Loss of cargo through accidental spilling.
Sweat Damage	Moisture damage from condensation inside holds or containers.
Inherent Vice	Damage caused by the nature of the cargo itself.
Stevedore	A worker who loads and unloads vessels.
Consignee	The person or company receiving the cargo.
Shipper	The person or company sending the cargo.

WHY IT MATTERS

These terms appear throughout bills of lading, survey reports, and claim correspondence. Knowing them precisely is the difference between a clear claim and a costly misunderstanding.

Past Simple vs Past Continuous

When describing incidents in maritime contexts, we often use both tenses together. Understanding the difference lets you explain exactly when and how damage occurred.

Past Simple — completed actions. For actions that started and finished at a specific time.

The cargo **was damaged**.

The container **fell**.

The vessel **arrived**.

Past Continuous — actions in progress. For actions ongoing at a particular past time: *was/were + verb-ing*.

The crew **was loading** the cargo.

The stevedores **were operating** the crane.

Using both together. Use the Past Simple for the main event and the Past Continuous for the background action that was happening when it occurred.

The cargo **was damaged** while it **was being discharged**.

The container **fell** while the crane **was operating**.

The damage **occurred** while stevedores **were working** on deck.

Past Continuous in Context

Common maritime verbs and how they appear in the Past Continuous when setting the scene for an incident.

BASE FORM	PAST CONTINUOUS	EXAMPLE IN CONTEXT
load	was/were loading	The crew was loading containers.
discharge	was/were discharging	The vessel was discharging cargo.
operate	was/were operating	The crane was operating at full speed.
transport	was/were transporting	The truck was transporting goods.
inspect	was/were inspecting	The surveyor was inspecting the hold.
sail	was/were sailing	The ship was sailing through rough seas.
wait	was/were waiting	The vessel was waiting for berth allocation.
negotiate	was/were negotiating	We were negotiating the charter terms.
review	was/were reviewing	The P&I club was reviewing the claim.

KEY POINT

Use the Past Continuous to set the scene and the Past Simple for the specific event that caused the damage.

*“While the vessel **was discharging** at berth 7, a container **was dropped**.”*

*“The cargo **was contaminated** while it **was being transferred** to storage.”*

Vocabulary in Context

Complete each sentence with the correct term from the word bank.

WORD BANK tally sweat damage consignee stowage survey pilferage
outturn inherent vice

- 1 The independent _____ inspected the cargo and issued a detailed report.
- 2 Condensation inside the hold caused _____ to the bagged grain.
- 3 Several cartons were missing on arrival — a clear case of _____.
- 4 Careful _____ kept the cargo from shifting during heavy weather.
- 5 The _____ refused to accept delivery because the goods were damaged.
- 6 The final _____ showed a shortage of twelve tonnes against the bill of lading.
- 7 The fruit spoiled because of its _____, not because of mishandling.
- 8 The _____ count at discharge did not match the figures on the manifest.

ANSWER KEY

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. survey | 5. consignee |
| 2. sweat damage | 6. outturn |
| 3. pilferage | 7. inherent vice |
| 4. stowage | 8. tally |

SECTION TWO

Claims and Dispute Resolution

Cargo Claims

When cargo is damaged, a formal claims process begins, involving the shipper, consignee, ship owner, charterer, and insurers. Professional language and clear documentation are essential to resolving disputes.

THE CLAIMS PROCESS

- 1 Discovery.** The consignee discovers damage upon receipt of cargo.
- 2 Notification.** The receiver notifies the carrier and shipper of the damage.
- 3 Survey.** An independent surveyor inspects the cargo and issues a report.
- 4 Claim Filing.** The claimant submits a formal claim with supporting documents.
- 5 Investigation.** The carrier investigates the circumstances of the damage.
- 6 Negotiation.** Parties discuss responsibility and potential settlement.
- 7 Resolution.** The claim is settled, rejected, or proceeds to arbitration.

KEY DOCUMENTS

Bill of Lading · Survey Report · Commercial Invoice · Packing List · Photographs of Damage · Letter of Protest · Statement of Claim

Sample Phone Dialogue

Discussing a cargo damage dispute professionally — note how both past tenses pinpoint when the damage occurred.

- BROKER** Good morning. I'm calling regarding the cargo damage claim for the MV Atlantic Star.
- OWNER** Good morning. Yes, I received the notification. What are the details?
- BROKER** The cargo **was damaged** while it **was being discharged** at Rotterdam.
- OWNER** I understand. Do you know when exactly the damage **occurred**?
- BROKER** The surveyor's report indicates the damage occurred while stevedores **were operating** the crane.
- OWNER** So the damage happened during terminal operations, not while at sea?
- BROKER** That appears to be the case, but the receiver insists responsibility remains with the vessel.
- OWNER** We will need to review the survey report carefully. The matter is **under review**.
- BROKER** I understand. When can we expect your response?
- OWNER** We should have our position ready within 48 hours.
- BROKER** Thank you. I will inform the charterer and revert if needed.

Negotiating Responsibility

Reaching a fair settlement diplomatically — proposing, conceding, and confirming amounts without escalation.

BROKER We have reviewed the survey report. Would you consider a shared settlement?

OWNER What exactly are you proposing?

BROKER The charterer suggests splitting the claim 50/50 to avoid prolonged disputes.

OWNER We may agree to a settlement if further claims are withdrawn.

BROKER I will need to consult with the charterer on that condition.

OWNER Please also confirm the total amount being claimed.

BROKER The claim totals USD 45,000 based on the commercial invoice value.

OWNER We are prepared to consider USD 22,500 as a **full and final settlement**.

BROKER I will revert after consulting the charterer. Thank you for your flexibility.

OWNER We are open to a reasonable resolution. Please confirm by end of day.

USEFUL NEGOTIATION PHRASES

“Would you consider a shared settlement?”

“We are prepared to offer a commercial solution.”

“The matter is under review.”

“I will revert after consulting with my principal.”

“We are open to a reasonable resolution.”

Formal Email — Claim Notice

TO owners@atlanticshipping.com
FROM broker@oceanbrokers.com

Cargo Damage Claim — MV Atlantic Star — Voyage 2024-127

Dear Sirs,

We write to formally notify you of cargo damage that occurred during the discharge of the above vessel at Rotterdam on 15 January 2025.

During discharge operations, three containers were damaged while being lifted from the hold. The surveyor confirmed that the damage occurred while the containers were being transferred by the terminal crane.

The receiver has documented the damage and intends to file a formal claim. We attach the preliminary survey report and photographs for your review. Please acknowledge receipt and advise your position at your earliest convenience.

Best regards,
John Smith — Ocean Brokers Ltd.

KEY FEATURES

Clear subject line identifying vessel and voyage · uses Past Simple and Past Continuous correctly · states facts objectively without assigning blame · references attached documentation · requests acknowledgement and response.

Email Reply — Ship Owner

TO broker@oceanbrokers.com
FROM owners@atlanticshipping.com

RE: Cargo Damage Claim — MV Atlantic Star — Voyage 2024-127

Dear Mr. Smith,

Thank you for your notification dated 16 January 2025 regarding the above claim. We have reviewed the preliminary survey report and wish to provide our initial position.

According to our records, the cargo was properly secured before discharge commenced. The Master's log confirms that all cargo was in good condition when discharge operations began at 0600 hours on 15 January.

The damage appears to have occurred during terminal operations while the containers were being handled by shore equipment. We note the surveyor's report indicates the crane operator was changing shifts when the incident occurred.

We are currently reviewing the survey report in detail and will revert with our full response within 48 hours.

Best regards,
Maria Chen — Atlantic Shipping Co.

NOTICE THE TECHNIQUE

The owner acknowledges receipt, presents facts from the Master's log, and uses the Past Continuous ("were being handled," "was changing shifts") to locate responsibility with terminal operations — all without open accusation.

Settlement Proposal Email

FROM broker@oceanbrokers.com

RE: Cargo Damage Claim — Commercial Settlement Proposal

Dear Ms. Chen,

Further to our telephone conversation earlier today, we are pleased to confirm the charterer's proposal for a commercial settlement.

Given the circumstances surrounding the incident and the shared interest in avoiding prolonged disputes, the charterer proposes a 50/50 split of the claim amount. The total claim value is USD 45,000. Under this proposal, each party would contribute USD 22,500 as full and final settlement of all claims arising from this incident.

We believe this represents a fair and reasonable solution that allows all parties to move forward. Please confirm your acceptance by close of business Friday.

Best regards,
John Smith

SETTLEMENT LANGUAGE

full and final settlement · commercial settlement · without prejudice · subject to contract · shared responsibility. “without prejudice” protects your future legal position; “subject to contract” keeps terms provisional.

Claims Language Practice

Complete each sentence with the correct word or phrase from the word bank.

WORD BANK notification liable without prejudice time bar survey report
settlement arbitration negotiation

- 1 We write to give formal _____ of damage to the cargo discharged on 12 May.
- 2 The carrier may be held _____ for the loss if negligence is proven.
- 3 This correspondence is sent _____ and without any admission of responsibility.
- 4 A claim must be filed before the _____ expires, normally one year after delivery.
- 5 The surveyor's _____ confirmed the full extent of the damage.
- 6 After lengthy _____, the broker proposed sharing the costs equally.
- 7 Both parties reached an amicable _____ without going to court.
- 8 When the parties cannot agree, the dispute may proceed to _____.

ANSWER KEY

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------|
| 1. notification | 5. survey report |
| 2. liable | 6. negotiation |
| 3. without prejudice | 7. settlement |
| 4. time bar | 8. arbitration |

SECTION THREE

Cargo Holds and Safety



Cargo Holds

A cargo hold is an enclosed space designed to carry cargo. Understanding hold structures is essential for proper loading, stowage, and safety. Different vessel types have different configurations based on their intended cargo.

TYPES OF CARGO HOLDS

Single Hold	One large cargo space, typically on smaller vessels. Simple design but limited flexibility in segregation.
Multiple Holds	Separated compartments allowing different cargoes to be carried at once without cross-contamination.
Box-Shaped Holds	Rectangular design for easier loading and cleaning. Common on container and general cargo ships.
Hopper-Sided Holds	Common on bulk carriers; angled lower sides improve cargo flow during discharge and aid stability.

CARGO HOLD STRUCTURES

Hatch Covers	Large steel covers that seal the cargo hold opening.
Coamings	Raised edges around the hatch opening to prevent water ingress.
Tank Tops	The bottom plating of the hold (double-bottom ceiling).
Frames & Bulkheads	Structural supports and watertight divisions.
Bilge Wells	Low points in the hold where water collects for pumping.
Ladders	Access points for entering and exiting the cargo hold.
Dog	A hold fast, a short metal rod or bar fashioned to form a clamp or clip and used for holding watertight doors, manholes, or pieces of work in place.

Cargo Hold Safety

Entering cargo holds can be dangerous. Enclosed spaces may contain hazardous atmospheres from cargo residues, fumigation chemicals, or oxygen depletion. Strict procedures must be followed before anyone enters.

SAFETY PROCEDURES BEFORE ENTRY

- ✓ Ventilate the cargo hold thoroughly before entry.
- ✓ Test the atmosphere for oxygen levels (must be 19.5–23.5%).
- ✓ Check for toxic gases (H₂S, CO, fumigants).
- ✓ Obtain an entry permit from the responsible officer.
- ✓ Establish communication with a standby person outside.
- ✓ Ensure rescue equipment is available, and use appropriate PPE.
- ✓ Never enter alone without a standby person.

SAFETY LANGUAGE — PASSIVE VOICE

“The cargo hold was ventilated before entry.” · “Oxygen levels were checked and found safe.” · “Access was restricted due to safety concerns.” · “The atmosphere was tested at 0800 hours.” · “Entry was prohibited until the permit was issued.”

Grammar Practice

Complete the sentences using the Past Simple or the Past Continuous.

- 1 The cargo _____ (get) wet while the crew _____ (load) the vessel.
- 2 The container _____ (fall) while the crane _____ (operate).
- 3 The receiver _____ (notice) damage after discharge _____ (finish).
- 4 The vessel _____ (delay) because loading _____ (take) longer than expected.
- 5 The cargo _____ (damage) while it _____ (transport) to the warehouse.
- 6 The surveyor _____ (arrive) while the crew _____ (secure) the hatches.
- 7 The broker _____ (call) while we _____ (review) the survey report.
- 8 The hold _____ (flood) while the vessel _____ (sail) through the storm.

ANSWER KEY

- | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. got, was loading | 5. was damaged, was being transported |
| 2. fell, was operating | 6. arrived, were securing |
| 3. noticed, finished | 7. called, were reviewing |
| 4. was delayed, was taking | 8. flooded, was sailing |

Writing & Speaking Tasks

Apply the language of this module. Tasks 1–3 are written; Tasks 4–5 are spoken.

1 Damage claim email **EMAIL**

Write a formal email from a broker to a ship owner notifying them of cargo damage. Include the type of cargo, when the damage occurred, what was happening at that time, and a request for response. Use both Past Simple and Past Continuous.

2 Reply email **EMAIL**

Write a reply from the ship owner: acknowledge the claim, explain events from the owner's perspective, reference the survey report, and close professionally.

3 Settlement proposal **EMAIL**

Write a follow-up email proposing a commercial settlement. Use the Past Simple to explain what happened, cause-and-effect language, and a polite negotiation tone.

4 Describe an incident **SPEAKING**

Describe a damage incident orally: the type of cargo, what happened, when, what was going on at the time, and who was responsible.

5 Safety briefing **SPEAKING**

Describe the cargo hold and explain the safety steps before entering. Use safety vocabulary and the passive voice where suitable.

Bibliographic References

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END OF MODULE 4

Maritime Technical English

Cargo, Claims & Safety

 English Mastered