

How to Describe Turbulence Precisely

A concise ICAO Level 5–6 vocabulary summary for Aviation English learners

Turbulence can be routine — or a genuine operational event. The words below help you describe exactly which one it is, with the precision ICAO examiners are listening for.

1 Grammar on the Radar

STRUCTURE	EXAMPLE
uncountable noun	"The turbulence was intense." / "The turbulence is increasing."
present perfect	"The aircraft has encountered moderate turbulence."
countable form	"The aircraft has encountered several areas of turbulence."

2 Turbulence vs. Turbulent

WORD	USE
turbulence (noun)	identifies the phenomenon — "encountered moderate turbulence"
turbulent (adj.)	describes conditions — "entered a turbulent area"

3 On the Gauge — Intensity

Light INTENSITY	Moderate INTENSITY	Severe INTENSITY	Extreme INTENSITY
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4 Frequency & Distribution

TERM	MEANING
occasional	happens sometimes, not regularly
intermittent	starts and stops — on, off, on, off
continuous	persists without interruption
increasing / decreasing	describes a change in intensity over time
isolated / widespread	confined to specific areas vs. spread along the route

MEMORY HOOK Think of intermittent fasting — eating, not eating, eating, not eating. That on/off rhythm is exactly what "intermittent turbulence" describes.

5 Straight From the Black Box — Key Phrases

PHRASE	USE
intermittent light turbulence	frequency + intensity in one phrase
periodic illumination of the seatbelt sign	formal way of saying "the sign kept coming on"
a jolt of turbulence	noun and verb — "turbulence jolted the aircraft"
clear air turbulence (CAT)	turbulence with no visual / convective indication

CONTEXT STRUCTURE TO LEARN BY HEART

"At the time of the flight's turbulence encounter, there were no active in-flight weather advisories or company-issued advisories for the area."

Reusable frame: At the time of the flight's [event], there were no [relevant condition] for the area.

Source case study: United Airlines Flight 115, NTSB report released 21 Aug 2026 · **Full episode & blog post:** revisebeforeflight.com · Newsletter: Aviation English Logbook