

English Grammar: Double Negatives

In English, the following words are considered to be grammatically “negative”:

Pronouns	Verbs			Adverbs	Adjectives
no-one nobody nowhere nothing	to be: isn't aren't wasn't weren't	Auxiliary: don't doesn't didn't won't hasn't haven't hadn't	Modal: can't wouldn't couldn't shouldn't mustn't needn't shan't oughtn't	no not none never neither nor hardly barely scarcely rarely seldom without	unavoidable unlimited etc. impossible imperfect etc. indecisive ineffective etc.

In English, it is considered bad grammar to use two negative words in one phrase, and the concept is called a “double negative”. It is not acceptable because “two negatives” cancel each other and make “a positive” (like in mathematics), which can create confusion. For example:

The phrase “I didn’t see nothing” means “I saw something” (2 negatives make a positive) but the intention was to say “I saw nothing” or “I didn’t see anything”:

<u>Wrong</u>	<u>Right</u>
I didn't see nothing.	I didn't see anything. <i>(more common)</i>
	I saw nothing. <i>(less common)</i>

So we need to “un-negate” one of the negative words:

I didn't see nothing .	I didn't see nothing.
↓	↓
I didn't see anything .	I saw nothing.

Sometimes we have only one option. For example:

<u>Wrong</u>	<u>Right</u>
Nobody did nothing.	Nobody did anything.

In this case, we cannot “un-negate” the first word, because it is the subject of the sentence:

Nobody did nothing.	Nobody did nothing .
↓	↓
Anybody did nothing.	Nobody did anything .

Here is another example:

<u>Wrong</u>	<u>Right</u>
I don't have no money.	I don't have any money. <i>(more common)</i>
	I have no money. <i>(less common)</i>

Some English words are obviously negative, such as “not”, “isn’t” and “nobody”. However, there are some English words which have a negative connotation, but don’t appear to be negative, such as “hardly”, “barely” and “scarcely”. These words are synonymous and have a negative connotation, so using them with a negative word like “can’t” or “couldn’t” is regarded as a double negative, and so is bad grammar. For example:

<u>Wrong</u>	<u>Right</u>
I can't hardly wait.	I can hardly wait.
I can't barely wait.	I can barely wait.
I can't scarcely wait.	I can scarcely wait.

The translations of these adverbs are “mal”, “difícilmente” or “quase não”, depending on the context. For example:

<u>English</u>	<u>Portuguese</u>
I can hardly wait.	<i>Eu mal posso esperar.</i>
He barely goes out.	<i>Ele quase não sai.</i>
I scarcely do my homework.	<i>Eu dificilmente faço minha tarefa.</i>

Note: The adverb “hardly” is not related to the adjective “hard”. In fact, if used incorrectly, the adverb “hardly” could cause offence. For example, consider these two phrases:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| a) You work hard . | This is a compliment. | <i>(Você trabalha muito)</i> |
| b) You hardly work . | This is offensive. | <i>(Você mal trabalha)</i> |

Also, the word “without” is considered negative, so phrases such as “without nothing” or “without nobody” are also bad grammar. For example:

<u>Wrong</u>	<u>Right</u>
I went without nobody.	I went without anybody.
He travelled without nothing.	He travelled without anything.

When two negatives make a positive

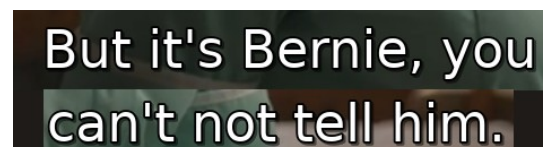
Sometimes we deliberately use a double negative to say the equivalent positive phrase, but with a slightly different emphasis. These cases are called “weak double negatives”. For example:

- A: I won’t buy a lottery ticket, because winning is impossible!
 B: It’s **not impossible**, it’s just highly improbable!

- A: I have an opportunity to go to Europe, but I can’t go.
 B: What! You can’t miss this opportunity! You **can’t not** go!

- A: I’ll do it later. I have all the time in the world.
 B: Time is **not unlimited**. You should do it today.

- A: My mother is always in the kitchen.
 B: Yes – she is **never not** in the kitchen!



A joke

An English teacher said to his class “In English, two negative words make a positive phrase, but two positive words can never make a negative phrase”.
 Then one of his students replied “Yeah, right!”

Exercise. Correct these grammatically incorrect sentences:

1. I didn't say nothing. _____
2. There isn't nobody here. _____
3. Nowhere isn't safe. _____
4. I don't have nothing. _____
5. They didn't see nowhere to park. _____
6. He hardly does no homework. _____
7. Nobody couldn't come. _____
8. She doesn't have no patience. _____
9. She didn't have no apples. _____
10. He went out without no money. _____
11. He hardly eats nothing. _____
12. You never give us no money! _____
13. She hasn't eaten none of them. _____
14. I don't want nothing to eat. _____
15. I don't rarely see you these days. _____
16. He doesn't seldom go to the park. _____
17. Netflix barely has no horror films. _____



From “Bikram” (Netflix): “Você nunca vai dizer nada a ninguém, nunca.”

Suggested videos: <https://english.insl.com.br/files/videos/Double-negative.mp4> (short)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGY_KOccR5A (English – 3 mins)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhQQxin0394> (Portuguese – 10 mins)