

19 Conditional sentences

*Will he come if I shout?
Would you have enough time?
I'd have been upset if I hadn't known.
She purrs if you stroke her.*

Key considerations

Course materials generally present four basic types of conditional sentence. In this chapter we look at each of these types, but within each type we explore a range of possible forms, some of which may be neglected or ignored in popular materials. Finally, we look at some general variants on conditional forms.

Some European languages have special conditional tenses – forms of the verb that are used primarily or only in conditional sentences. This is not true in English, and some people argue that it is misleading to think of conditional structures as being special.

Some learners find it difficult to remember the grammar of long conditional sentences with two clauses. We can help them by teaching and practising one clause at a time, and can provide a lot of opportunities and help for students to 'get their tongues round' the complete sentences.

What are conditional sentences?

Course materials usually teach that conditional sentences consist of two clauses – a main ('conditional') clause containing a verb in a form with *will* or *would*, and a subordinate clause that is introduced by *if*.

I'll help you if you want. He'd come if you called.

What we express in the main clause depends – or is conditional – on what we express in the subordinate (*if*) clause.

I'll turn on the heating if it gets colder.

We can usually change the order of clause in conditional sentences, e.g. we can say *I'll turn on the heating if it gets colder* or *If it gets colder, I'll turn on the heating*.

How we punctuate conditional sentences depends partly on their length and partly on personal preference, but in general we separate the two clauses by a comma if we begin with the *if* clause. We don't use a comma when we begin with the conditional clause.

In casual conversation *if* is often barely pronounced. The vowel disappears entirely, and even /f/ is whispered. A phrase like *If I were you* is pronounced /fɑrwəju:./.

Basic forms and closely related variants

Type 1

Basic form and meaning

Type 1 conditional sentences are sometimes called the ‘first’ or ‘future’ conditional. Both clauses refer to the future, although the verb in the *if* clause is in a present tense. Coursebooks usually teach this at an elementary or intermediate level.

<i>If</i> clause	Conditional clause
<i>If</i> + present tense <i>If it gets colder tonight,</i>	future form <i>I'll turn on the heating.</i>

Conditional clause	<i>If</i> clause
future form <i>He'll get here early</i>	<i>if</i> + present tense <i>if he catches the fast train.</i>

We often teach this conditional to express aspects of persuasion such as cajoling and negotiating and for giving warnings and making threats.

Persuasion: *I'll take the children to the party if you collect them from school.*

Warning: *If you try to take a short cut, you'll get lost.*

Threat: *If you poke your brother again, I'll thrash you.*

Other forms

In this section we look at forms of Type 1 conditional sentences that are different from the ‘basic’ form.

***If* + present, imperative**

We use an imperative rather than a future form of the verb in the conditional clause, for example to give advice or instructions.

<i>If</i> clause	Conditional clause
<i>If</i> + present <i>If you go to the supermarket,</i>	imperative <i>bring back a carton of milk please.</i>

Other present tenses

We can also use a range of future forms in the conditional clause (see Chapter 14 for a full description and illustration of the options).

Present continuous: *We're staying at home on Wednesday if the transport strike goes ahead.*

going to: *They're going to take their mother to the old house if she remembers where it is.*

We can use a range of present forms in the *if* clause depending on the meaning we want to express (see Chapter 13 for a full description and illustration of the options).

Present perfect: *If it hasn't rained by the weekend, we'll have to water the garden.*

Present continuous: *If they're watching TV, they won't hear you.*

Should

We sometimes use *should* before the verb in the *if* clause of Type 1 conditional sentences. Often this weakens the possibility, implying *by any chance ...*

If you should find yourself at a loose end over the holiday, you'll always be welcome at our house.

We also sometimes use *should* in place of *if*, usually in more formal, written contexts. For example, the following is part of an internal memo distributed to staff in a chain of stores:

Should people complain about the quality of any goods, please refer them directly to the customer services department.

Type 2

Basic form and meaning

Coursebooks tend to teach this form at a lower intermediate level.

Type 2 conditional sentences are sometimes called the 'second', 'hypothetical' or 'unreal' conditional. We use them to refer to or speculate about something that is (or that we perceive to be) impossible or 'contrary to fact'. This is sometimes presented to learners as 'very unlikely'. The real point, however, is that at the moment of speaking we see the action or event as being impossible.

They can refer to the present or the future.

Time reference	<i>If</i> clause	Conditional clause
Present	<i>If + past tense</i> <i>If he didn't annoy me so much,</i>	<i>would + bare infinitive</i> <i>I'd spend more time in his office.</i>
Future	<i>If I got an invitation,</i>	<i>I'd go there right away.</i>

Both Type 1 and Type 2 conditionals can refer to the future. Sometimes teachers tell students that Type 2 is 'less likely' than Type 1, but this explanation distracts them from the real basis for choosing Type 2.

Type 1: *If it gets colder tonight, I'll turn on the heating.* (a real possibility)

Type 2: *If it got colder tonight, I'd turn on the heating.* (viewed as not a real possibility)

In the *if* clause we often use *were* in place of *was* (some people consider that it is incorrect to use *was* after *if*).

I'd be able to find the information if I were at home.

Course materials often introduce Type 2 conditional sentences beginning *If I were you ...* idiomatically to express advice, separately from Type 2 conditional sentences as a grammatical class.

If I were you, I'd make an appointment to see the doctor.

Other forms

Should

Some people regularly use *should* instead of *would* after *I* and *we*.

I shouldn't get to sleep at all if I lived next to that noise.

Should is often used in place of *would* in official or commercial correspondence.

I should be grateful for an early response to my letter.

Were + infinitive

We sometimes use *were* + infinitive instead of a past tense form in the *if* clause of Type 2 conditional sentences. This makes the event seem more hypothetical or the statement more tentative and, therefore, more polite.

If the river were to rise above the height of the flood barrier, there would be absolutely nothing we could do to save the city.

If you were to have a few minutes free, I'd really appreciate the opportunity to pick your brains.

Were + subject

When we use *were* in the *if* clause, we can invert *were* and the subject of the clause, and leave out *if* altogether:

Were he really ill, I might feel more sympathetic.

Were you to accept my offer, I'd personally oversee the arrangement.

If + would

In American English, *would* is often used in the *if* clause.

I'd eat something if I wouldn't have indigestion.

Type 3

Basic form and meaning

Coursebooks tend to teach the following at an upper intermediate level.

If clause	Conditional clause
If + past perfect <i>If we hadn't wasted time,</i>	would + have + past participle <i>we wouldn't have missed the train.</i>

Conditional clause	If clause
would + have + past participle <i>I would have been more sympathetic</i>	if + past perfect <i>if she hadn't accused me of lying.</i>

We use this conditional to speculate about past events, and about how things that happened or didn't happen might have affected other things (e.g. in the second example she accused me of lying and so I wasn't very sympathetic).

We often teach this conditional to express reproach and regret.

If you hadn't driven so fast, you would never have had the accident.

I wouldn't have left my job if I'd known how difficult it is to find another one.

We sometimes use the Type 3 conditional to make excuses (we can consider this use within the overall category of 'regret').

If there hadn't been an accident on the motorway, I would have been here on time.

Type 3 conditional sentences are sometimes called the 'third' or 'past' conditional.

Other forms

had have + past participle

Many native speakers of English use a non-standard variant of the Type 3 conditional. Although it would be inappropriate for learners to learn this, they will often come across it.

If clause	Conditional clause
If + had have + past participle <i>If they'd have arrived on time,</i>	would + have + past participle <i>I'd have let them into the examination.</i>

Had + subject + past participle

We can use *Had* + subject + past participle in Type 3 conditionals in place of *if* + subject + past perfect.

Had I known he was ill, I would never have shouted at him.

Zero conditional sentences

The form of this conditional is:

If clause	Conditional clause
If + present tense	present tense
<i>If you want to change money on a Sunday,</i>	<i>you have to go to one of the big railway stations.</i>

Conditional clause	If clause
present tense	if + present tense
<i>Most cats purr</i>	<i>if you tickle them under the chin.</i>

We use this conditional to express general truths. Learners usually find this use of tenses logical and straightforward. As long as they know the meaning of the word *if*, they will often automatically produce zero conditional sentences accurately and appropriately.

General variants on conditional sentences

Conjunctions

Conjunctions other than *if*

We can use a range of conjunctions in conditional sentences as well as *if*. These include: *supposing*, *as long as* (Types 1 & 2), *provided*, *on condition (that)*, *unless* (all types).

*Where will you go, **supposing** you manage to have a holiday?*

*I would help him **as long as** he asked me nicely.*

*I wouldn't have come round **unless** you'd phoned and asked me to.*

Supposing suggests an act of imagination; *provided*, *as long as*, and *on condition (that)* suggest reservation – often it is the speaker who is imposing the condition. We also use *only if* to express similar meaning.

Course materials sometimes teach that *unless* is the same as *if ... not*. In fact we use it to express a stronger degree of reservation: *I won't come round unless you phone* is closer in meaning to *I'll only come round if you phone* than *I won't come round if you don't phone*.

In case suggests the need to be ready for something (e.g. *Take an umbrella in case it rains.*) and is not a conditional conjunction. However, learners often use *in case* as a substitute for *if* (**You'll get wet in case it rains.*).

Omitting conjunctions

Very informally we sometimes leave out any word or words that directly express conditional meaning when it is clear from context that conditional meaning is implied. In these cases we usually link the two clauses with *and* or *or*.

*Eat any more of that pudding **and** you'll burst.* (i.e. If you eat ...)

*Keep still, you little devil, **or** I'll cut your throat.* (i.e. If you don't keep still ... / Unless you keep still ...)

If only and I wish

Statements beginning with *If only* or *I wish* are closely connected with conditional sentences in that we use a past tense to refer to a hypothetical present event and past perfect to refer to a hypothetical event in the past.

***If only** she paid a little more attention.*

***I wish** I hadn't agreed to take part.*

Verbs in a continuous form

The examples of conditional sentences which appear in course materials often include verbs only in a simple form (*if he comes ..., if they had worked ..., would she eat ...?*).

In fact, we use a continuous form of the verb if we want to suggest 'continuous meanings' (e.g. to emphasise the temporariness of something). We can use continuous verb forms in both the *if* and the main clauses.

*They'd have noticed the explosion if they **hadn't been making** so much noise.*

*We **would be lying** on the beach if we were still in Brighton.*

Modal verbs

Type 1

We can use *may*, *might* and *could* in the conditional clause of Type 1 conditional sentences to show that something is a possible consequence (rather than a certain one).

*I **can** bring something to eat if you want.*

*If you listen to me carefully, you **may** learn something useful.*

Types 2 and 3

We can also use *might* and *could* in place of *would* in Type 2 and 3 conditional sentences.

*If you explained a bit more clearly, I **might** understand.*

*If we hadn't worked so hard, we **could** have missed our deadline.*

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Zero conditionals

We can use modal verbs in either or both clauses of a zero conditional.

*If you have a ticket, you **can** go through now.*

*You **should** wear glasses if you **can't** see.*

Will and would in if clauses

As a rule we don't use *will* or *would* in the *if* clause of conditional sentences, and we may have to correct mistakes when learners use them inappropriately. It isn't true, however, that *will* and *would* never occur in the *if* clause.

We can use *would* (*like*) in *if* clauses where the meaning is similar to *want*.

*If you **would** like to sit down, please help yourself to a seat.*

We can use *will* in an *if* clause where the meaning is similar to *be prepared to/be willing to*.

*If you'**ll** wait a minute, the doctor will be here to see you.*

Will and *would* can suggest perverse and deliberate behaviour (and are then normally stressed). In this case we can use *will* in Type 1 and *would* in Type 2 *if* clauses.

*If you **will** argue with everyone, you can't expect to be popular.*

*If you **wouldn't** take so much time off, you might earn more.*

Single clauses

Teaching materials sometimes give the impression that all conditional sentences have two clauses. In fact we very frequently use only one clause. Sometimes we use the *if* clause. This is usually when the conditional clause is already understood – for example, in replying to questions.

A: Are you going on holiday this year? B: If I win the pools.

More often we use just the conditional clause. In this case, a condition is usually implied.

I would have appreciated some help. (i.e. if it had been available)

Sometimes the condition is expressed in some other way.

Do you think the punch would taste better with more fruit juice? (i.e. if it contained more fruit juice)

Mixed conditional sentences

Things we did in the past may have present consequences, and equally these past events may be the result of timeless or present facts. We often refer to

both the present and the past in conditional sentences, and we choose the tense of the main verb in each clause accordingly – one clause may be conditional Type 2 and the other may be conditional Type 3.

Past action: *You wasted money last week.*

Present consequence: *We can't afford a good holiday.*

If clause (Type 3)	Main clause (Type 2)
<i>If you hadn't wasted so much money last week,</i>	<i>we'd be able to afford a better holiday.</i>

Present (general) fact: *I am very busy.*

Past consequence: *I wasn't able to take off any time last week.*

If clause (Type 2)	Main clause (Type 3)
<i>If I weren't so busy,</i>	<i>I could have taken off a few days last week.</i>

We also mix Type 1 and Type 2 structures. Some people feel we should avoid this.

I would probably forgive Salisbury anything as long as they never mess with the Cathedral Close.

Should we teach 'conditional sentences'?

At present, many course materials teach four basic types of conditional sentence. Learners usually find this helpful, especially if their own language has equivalent conditional structures. Other learners may find it simpler to learn the features of conditional sentences in other contexts. For example:

- The grammar of Type 1 conditional sentences is the same as that of non-conditional sentences that include a time conjunction. After these conjunctions (e.g. *when, after, before, as soon as, until* etc.), we also use a present tense even though we are referring to future time. We can teach *if* in the context of these other time conjunctions.
- We can teach *would* and *would have* as a modal verb to express hypothetical meaning, and can teach the use of the past and past perfect tenses to refer to an imagined or unreal present or past in the context of expressions beginning with *if*, or the verb *wish*.

Some people argue strongly that we should avoid using the term 'conditional' and that we should avoid the four basic 'types'. Some coursebooks reflect this view, presenting 'real and hypothetical possibilities with *if*' or 'imaginary situations with *if*' rather than the more traditional 'conditional' label.

