Conditionals

Conditional sentences are formed by a main clause containing a proposition and a subordinate clause (the *if-clause*) specifying the condition on which the main proposition is true. The *if-clause* generally comes first – and it is often separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma – but the order of the two parts can be reversed.

There are three main kinds of conditional sentences, usually called *first*, *second*, and *third conditional* (or *Type 1*, *Type 2*, and *Type 3* conditionals). Commonly, the *if-clause* is in the *present simple*, the *past simple* and the *past perfect* for first, second and third conditional respectively, while in the main clause the *future simple*, *would + bare infinitive* and *would + perfect infinitive* are used:

| I. | If you take an aspirin, present simple | you’ll feel better future simple |
| II. | If you took an aspirin, past simple | you would feel better would + bare infinitive |
| III. | If you had taken an aspirin, past perfect | you would have felt better would + perfect infinitive |

However, as we shall see below, conditional sentences display a rather large combinations of verb forms in both the simple and progressive aspects.

In Type 1 conditional, after first-person pronouns, singular and plural, both *shall* and *will* can be used. *Shall* is more formal, rare in American English and becoming less and less common in British English; *will*, therefore, is the unmarked choice for all persons. The same applies to *should* and *would* in Type 2 conditional sentences, but remember that *should* is normally used, in all persons, as an epistemic and obligation modal.

Sometimes *if ... then* is used in order to emphasize that the action mentioned in the apodosis (the apodosis is the main, consequent, clause in a conditional sentence) depends on the protasis (the clause expressing the condition in a conditional sentence):

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If you can’t finish the job within a week, then we’ll have to ask somebody else
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**First conditional**

Type 1 conditional is used to talk about something that may well happen in the future. The condition, that is to say, is considered “real”, possible or even quite likely to be fulfilled:

- *If you don’t work hard, you will be fired*
- *I’ll get in touch with you if I receive any news*

Type 1 conditional can be used in offers and suggestions as well as to give warnings and make threats:

- *If you need a lift, I can give you one*
- *If you behave like this, I’ll have to take you back home*
Tense variations:

As we have stated above, the if-clause is usually in the present simple. Yet the present continuous, present perfect simple and present perfect continuous – as well as various modal forms, as will be seen below – are also to be found:

- If it’s been snowing all night, I won’t go to school
- If she has received your message, she will certainly reply
- Well, if he’s still working I’ll call the office

The main clause usually has a verb in the future simple but the imperative, “be going to” future, future continuous and future perfect can also be employed, as well as modal verbs:

- If you see John, please give him my message
- If everything goes right, in two weeks I’ll be moving to San Francisco
- If I pass the English test, I’ll have passed all the exams of this semester

Sometimes the present simple is used in both the if- and the main clauses, indicating that what is said in the main proposition follows from what is stated in the if-clause. In this kind of sentences, often called zero conditional sentences, if means the same as when/whenever. Actually, so-called zero conditional sentences are not conditional sentences at all, since the if-clause does not pose a real condition that must exist for something else to take place:

- If I don’t sleep at least eight hours I feel tired all day

Though they are mostly used in the present tense, zero conditional sentences can also refer to past events and circumstances:

- If I went jogging in the evening, I always asked a friend to join me

Modal verbs:

In the subordinate clause “temporal” will cannot be used (the present simple being employed instead, as we have seen), but “volitional” will (meaning “be willing to”) can:

- If we don’t win the next match, we’ll be out of the tournament (temporal)
- If you will come with me, I’ll show you the entrance (volitional)
- If they won’t negotiate, we’ll have to go on strike again (volitional)

Would instead of will renders requests more polite. It is also possible to use would, with present reference, in both the main and the if-clause:

- If you would just wait a moment, I’ll be right back
- We would appreciate it if you would take care of this matter as soon as possible

Will after if can also express the idea of insistence:

- If you will treat her like that she will leave you soon (if you insist on treating her like that …)
In the if-clause *should* is used to express a tentative conditional, to suggest that something is unlikely or not very likely to happen. This construction is rather formal. Even more formal is the construction fronting *should*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If they should cancel the meeting, we’ll have to rearrange our plans} \\
\text{Should they cancel the meeting, we’ll have to rearrange our plans}
\end{align*}
\]

*...happen to* has a similar meaning:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If you happen to see William, tell him I need his help}
\end{align*}
\]

Finally, in the if-clause it is also possible to use *can* and *must*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I’ll lend you a hand if I can}
\end{align*}
\]

In addition to *will*, in the main clause it is also possible to use *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *should/ought to*, *must*, and semi-modals such as *be going to* and *have to*.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If you need any help, you should ask him} \\
\text{If you can program a computer, you can have the job} \\
\text{If you send them your CV, they might call you for an interview} \\
\text{If she gets this job, she’s going to take us all out to dinner} \\
\text{If you want to apply for the job, you have to send them a full curriculum vitae}
\end{align*}
\]

**Second conditional**

Type 2 conditional is used to talk about “unreal”, hypothetical situations. It can have both present and future reference:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If I were rich I would donate large sums of money to non-governmental organizations} \\
\text{If I had a lot of money I would be travelling around the world} \\
\text{If you cut down on fats for the next couple of months you would certainly lose some weight}
\end{align*}
\]

Type 2 conditional can be used in offers, suggestions, warnings and threats, making them less direct/more polite than they would be if Type 1 conditional were used:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If you needed some help, I would be glad to give it to you} \\
\text{If you felt like visiting the villa, we could make an appointment with the custodian} \\
\text{If you misbehaved, I would take you back home}
\end{align*}
\]

*If ... was/were: were* is used for all persons; yet *was* is acceptable, especially in informal contexts, for the first and third person singular except for the fixed expression *If I were you*, which is often used to give advice:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If I were you, I wouldn’t stand this kind of behaviour} \\
\text{If your brother was/were nicer, we would invite him to the party}
\end{align*}
\]
In polite requests, would be is normally used:

If you would be so kind as to wait a few minutes … (not: If you were so kind …)

Tense variations:

As we have seen, in Type 2 conditionals the if-clause is normally in the past simple; yet it is also possible to use the past continuous as well as modal verbs could, should, and would:

If they were trying harder, nobody would complain
If we could try once more, we would certainly find a solution

As is the case with will in Type 1 conditionals, would can be used in hypothetical if-clauses (as well as in the main clause) expressing volitional meaning:

If the management wouldn’t negotiate we would refuse to end the strike

If ... should is used, in more formal style, to talk about unreal or imaginary situations. If ... was/were to can be used in the same way, but only with dynamic verbs:

What would he do if she should leave him?
If she was/were to leave him, he would fall into depression

In formal and literary styles if can be dropped and an auxiliary verb put in initial position. This is the case with should, were to (was to is not used in this structure) and had:

Should you decide to come … (= If you should decide …)
Were he to become President, how would he try to stimulate the economy? (= If he were to become …)
Had he more authority, he would impose his decisions (= If he had more authority …)\(^e\)

The main clause usually has would + bare infinitive. Could and might are also used meaning, respectively, “would be able” and “would perhaps” or “would possibly”, which can of course also be found:

If we had more money, we could go on holiday abroad
If she knew, she might behave differently

Notice that should is not used in the main clause expressing obligation or necessity:

If they didn’t win the case, they would have to mortgage their house to pay the legal costs (not: *they should have …)

\(^e\) As we shall see, had can also be fronted in Type 3 conditionals: Had they conducted better negotiations, the hostages would not have been killed (= If they had conducted better negotiations …).
Third conditional

It is used to talk about unfulfilled conditions in the past, events which did not take place. While in Type 1 conditional conditions are *real* and in Type 2 *hypothetical*, in Type 3 they are *impossible*, contrary to fact:

- If I had had more time (but I didn’t), I would have done a better job
- If we hadn’t spent all our money on advertising (but we did), we would have been able to invest on new activities

Type 3 conditional is sometimes used to criticize people or pointing out their faults:

- If you had told us you were coming, we would have reserved two more seats

**Tense variations:**

In addition to the past perfect, in the subordinate clause it is possible to use the past perfect continuous or *could* + perfect infinitive:

- If he had been playing throughout the season, he wouldn’t have been so brilliant during the World Cup
- If I could have talked to him, I’m sure I would have convinced him to sponsor the project

The progressive aspect can also be found in the main clause:

- If we had made the wrong decision, we would have been wasting our time on a dead-end project

In the main clause *could* or *might* + perfect infinitive can also be used:

- If the police had arrived sooner, the robbers might have been caught
- If I had known about their financial difficulties, I could have helped them

Inversion of the subject and verb operator can occur in formal style:

- Had we been told about the risks, we would not have invested our money

**Words other than if**

Conditional sentences can also be introduced by words other than *if*. *Unless*, for example, is the equivalent of *if … not*. Thus, *unless* is followed by a verb in the affirmative:

- I won’t accept their offer unless they increase my salary (Italian translation: non accetterò la loro proposta a meno che *non* mi aumentino lo stipendio)
Other conditional subordinators are: *as long as*, *on condition* (that), *assuming* (that), *suppose/supposing* (that), *provided/providing* (that), *imagine*, *in case*:

- You can use my car *as long as* you drive very carefully
- Imagine we didn’t have a credit card, *what would we do now?*
- *I’ll let you in on my secret provided that* you don’t tell anyone
- *Assuming that* your suggestion is accepted, *what step* will you take next?

*In case* must be distinguished from *if*. Actually, *in case* is mainly used to talk about *precautions* one takes in view of something that may happen in the future. Consider the following example:

> I insured my jewellery *in case* it is stolen

The insurance has been taken out because of the possible future stealing of the jewellery (the stealing happens later, if at all). By using *if* people mean that they will do something only *on condition that* something else has already happened. To take out insurance *if* one’s jewellery is stolen would be silly (a typical case of closing the stable door after the horse has bolted). In the example below, for the postcard to be sent later the address has to be given first:

> *I’ll send you a postcard if* you give me your address

Compare the following sentences:

- *I’ll go pick them up in case it rains* (I won’t wait for the rain to start falling)
- *I’ll go pick them up if* it rains (I’ll go only if it starts raining)

*In case* is often followed by *should* + infinitive, especially when the main clause is in the past tense. This construction is employed when we think that something may happen by chance:

> *I bought two more tickets in case* they should decide to come with us

*In case of* can be used in a similar way to *if*:

> *In case of fire, ring the alarm (= if there is a fire …)*

**Implied conditionals**

Conditions are not always expressed in the form of conditional clauses. They can be implied, evident from the context:

- *I wouldn’t disturb him right now* (implied condition: *if I were you*)
- *Sorry, I can’t help. It would take too much time* (implied condition: *if I helped you*)
- *I would have decided otherwise* (implied condition, for example: *if I had found myself in that situation*)
- *I won’t stand it this time* (implied condition, for example: *if he behaves badly again*)
- *I would do some research at the library first* (implied condition, for example: *if I had to write a term paper*)
Mixed forms

Type 1, 2, and 3 conditionals can be mixed. The most common combination is that between second and third conditional, yet it is possible to have other combinations of tenses, the choice being determined by context:

If you had reserved a room, we wouldn’t be wasting time now looking for a place to stay!
I would have gone out with my friends if I didn’t have such a backlog of work

The first of the examples above refers to the present consequence of an action which did not take place in the past; the second to a present condition which has prevented something from happening in the past.