



grammar: conditionals  
from the desk of grzegorz pilecki

## Conditionals

There are many different ways to express “conditional” or “hypothetical” meaning in English. One of them is to use the word “if” in the clause that expresses the condition. For example, “If it rains, we’ll cancel the picnic. If it doesn’t rain, we won’t.” This handout explains how different verb tenses indicate different meanings when you are speaking hypothetically and should help you choose the right verb tense for the meaning you want to convey.

### • ZERO CONDITIONAL:

This conditional deals with “real” conditions. We don’t call it “real” because it has already happened: we call it real because it “always” happens this way. It is used to describe a condition with an absolutely predictable result—in other words, to state a fact, to talk about the laws of nature or scientific facts; therefore, **present tense** is used in both clauses.

1. If metal **gets** hot, it expands.
2. If you **stand** in the rain, you **get** wet.
3. If you **stick** your fingers in the fire, they **get** burned. (happens every time)

\*Zero Conditional consists of **If + Present Simple** in the conditional clause (If-clause) and **Present Simple** in the main clause. Conditional clause must be separated from the Main clause by the comma:

If + Present Simple, Present Simple

### • FIRST CONDITIONAL

This conditional deals with “likely” situations in the present or future. The situation being described hasn’t happened yet, and “likely” because we can easily imagine it happening. We use the first conditional to describe these situations.

For example, a 3 year old child is reaching toward the fire. It hasn’t put the fingers into the fire yet, but we know that small children don’t understand fire, so we can easily imagine the child touching it. We would say:

4. If you **stick** your fingers into the fire, you **will burn** yourself. (Same idea as above, but rather than stating a general fact, you are talking about a specific incident.)
5. If you **stick** your fingers into the fire, you **will be crying** all day.

Notice that the verb “stick” is in the present tense. Using the present tense verb shows two things:

1. it hasn’t happened yet
2. it could and is likely to happen

\*First Conditional consists of **If and present tense** in the conditional clause (If-clause), and **future reference** in the main clause:

If + present tense, future

Also notice that the main clause verbs (will burn, will be crying) can be in simple form or -ing form. It depends on whether you want to emphasize a single moment in time (simple form) or the an extended period of time (-ing form). In either case, use will + verb in the main clause.

Look at the example below:

6. If it **rains**, we **will stay** at home.

- On the other hand in the main clause, such items can also appear:

**should + bare infinitive** (the situation is unlikely to happen, doubtful or one wants to be polite)

7. If you **should** see him, give him my message.

**imperative** (as an instruction or advice)

If you fail your exam, you clean up your room for a week!

If you feel tired, drink a cup of coffee.

If you can't wake up, buy an alarm clock.

If you see my wife, tell her I'll be late for dinner.

**ought to** (advice)

If you fail your exam, you ought to study harder next time.

**had better** + infinitive (advice)

If you fail your exam, you had better study harder next time.

**may** (the result is just a possibility)

If we don't give them directions, they may get lost.

If we go to John's party, we may have a good time.

**can** (present decisions about future ability; otherwise we use **will be able to** to utterly refer to the future)

If I haven't enough time today, I can wash your car tomorrow

If you lose her telephone number, you won't be able to contact her later.

**unless\*** (unless = if not) "A will happen if it is not stopped by B"

Unless he gets a promotion, he'll resign. (If he doesn't get a promotion, he'll resign)

Let's have dinner out unless you're too tired (Let's have dinner out if you aren't too tired)

However, **unless** cannot be used in sentences that say "A will result from B not happening."

I will be glad if she doesn't come this evening.

~~\*I will be glad unless she comes this evening.~~

I will be surprised if she doesn't have an accident

~~\*I will be surprised unless she has an accident.~~

- **SECOND CONDITIONAL**

This conditional deals with situations in the present and future that are both unreal and unlikely. The situation we are describing hasn't happened yet, and is unlikely to happen in the future.

For example, a 25 year old is joking about reaching into the fire. He hasn't put his fingers into the fire yet, and we don't think he's serious about doing it, but we want to warn him about the consequences just in case. We would say:

7. If you **stuck** your fingers into the fire, you **would need** medical attention.
8. If you **stuck** your fingers into the fire, you **would be screaming** in pain all day.

Notice that the verb "stuck" is in the past tense. Using the past tense verb shows two things:

1. it hasn't happened yet (it's unreal)
2. you don't really believe it will happen (it's unlikely)

Also notice that the main clause verbs (would need, would be screaming) can be in simple form or -ing form. It depends on whether you want to emphasize a single moment in time (simple form) or the an extended period of time (-ing form). In either case, use would + verb in the main clause.

\*Second Conditional consists of **If + past tense** in the conditional clause (If-clause), and **would, could, should, might + infinitive** in the main clause.

10. If I **were** you, I **would tell** her the truth. (advice)
11. If he **were** here, he **could help** me. (imaginary situation)

- **If + were to + would**

*If war were to break out, I would emigrate to Mars.* (This makes a future possibility sound less probable).

- **THIRD CONDITIONAL**

This conditional deals with situations in the \*past\* that are unreal—they didn't happen. We can still imagine what the consequences would have been. In addition, it also refers to regrets, unfulfilled plans and criticism.

For example, the 25 year old was joking about reaching into the fire, but he didn't actually do it. We would say:

12. If you **had stuck** your hand into the fire, you **would have needed** medical attention.
13. If you **had stuck** your hand into the fire, you **would have been screaming** in pain.

In the next two examples, the 25 year old actually did stick his hand into the fire. The "unreal" situation is the opposite:

14. If you **hadn't stuck** your hand into the fire, you **wouldn't have spent** the evening in the emergency room.
15. If you **hadn't stuck** your hand into the fire, you **wouldn't have blistered** it so badly.

When the situation is unreal and in the past, use past perfect (had + -ed) in the conditional clause and would have + verb in the main clause.

\*Third Conditional consists of **If + Past Perfect** in the conditional clause (If-clause) and **would, could, should, might + have + past participle**.

16. If he **had worked** harder, he **would have been** promoted
17. She **could have been** healthier if she **had eaten** more vegetables.

- In the main clause the following modal verbs can be used:

**could** (ability/permission) **should** (advice) **might** (possibility)

- **MIXING TIME REFERENCES**

In the examples of the third conditional (unreal and in the past), both the conditional clause and the main clause refer to past time: If you had done this in the past, you would have experienced this in the past.

- a) It is also possible to mix time references—to talk about a condition in the past and the consequences in the present. For example:

18. If you **had stuck** your fingers into the fire last night, you **would be** in a lot of pain right now.
19. If you **hadn't stuck** your fingers into the fire last night, you **wouldn't be wearing** bandages today.

These sentences refer to events, which could have happened in the past, effects of which would be visible now.

- b) It does also happen that events from the past, have a reference to some events in the future, like in the examples below:

20. If she **had signed up** for the ski trip last week, she **would be** joining us tomorrow.
21. If Darren **hadn't wasted** his Christmas bonus gambling in Las Vegas, he **would go** to Mexico with us next month.

- c) Another possibility of mixing conditional sentences includes unreal present and past, namely Second and Third Conditional respectively.

22. If I **were** rich, I **would have bought** that Ferrari we saw yesterday.
23. If Sam **spoke** Russian, he **would have translated** the letter for you.

- d) Unreal present and future can also mix, like in 24 and 25:

24. If I **didn't have** so much vacation time, I **wouldn't go** with you on the cruise to Alaska next week.
25. If Dan **weren't** so nice, he **wouldn't be tutoring** you in math tonight.

- e) An event or events that are to happen in future can influence the choices made in the past:

26. If I **weren't going** on my business trip next week, I **would have accepted** that new assignment at work.
27. If Donna **weren't making** us a big dinner tonight, I **would have suggested** that we go to that nice Italian restaurant.

- f) Future references and unreal present references can also go in together.

28. If I **were going** to that concert tonight, I **would be** very excited.
29. If Sandy **were giving** a speech tomorrow, she **would be** very nervous.

\*Conditional clause (if-clause) does not necessary have to be the one to start the sentence with, and then followed by the main clause. When the main clause comes first and then is followed by the conditional clause (if-clause), it is crucial to skip the comma between these two clauses!

30. If he **is** still in Paris, he **may** visit us = He **may** visit us if he **is** still in Paris.

- Inversion in conditional sentences

In order to make an utterance more formal or resembling a literary style, *if* can sometimes be omitted together with changing the word order subject / auxiliary.

**If you should run** into Peter Bellamy, tell him he owes me a letter. = **Should you run** into Peter Bellamy...

**If she were** my daughter, I would send her to boarding school. = **Were she** my daughter...

**If war were** to break out, I would emigrate to Mars.= **Were war** to break out...

**If he had studied**, he would have passed. = **Had he studied**...

- Other words with conditional meaning

Numerous words and expressions can be used with a meaning similar to if (and with similar verb forms too).

**Supposing** you fell in love with your boss, what would you do?

You can borrow my bike **provided/providing** you bring it back.

I'll give you the day off **on condition that** you work on Saturday morning.

You are welcome to stay with us, **as long as** you share the rent.

**Exercise 1.** Zero Conditional. Natural situations. Answer the questions below as in the example:

*What happens if you heat ice? If you heat ice, it melts.*

1. What happens if flowers don't get any water?
2. What must a motorist do if the traffic lights are red?
3. What materials do you need if you want to write a letter? (you = one)
4. What do you like to drink if you are thirsty?
5. Who do businessmen go to see if they want to borrow money?
6. What do you expect a teacher to do if you make a mistake?
7. What must one have if one wants to visit a foreign country?
8. Who do people go to see if they feel ill?
9. What happens if there is a power failure?
10. How do people dress in your country if they work in an office?

**Exercise 2.** First Conditional - Matching Exercise. Match the first part of the sentence with the correct ending.

1. If you eat too much candy \_\_\_\_\_
2. If you don't study \_\_\_\_\_
3. You will have bad dreams \_\_\_\_\_
4. If you eat lots of vegetables \_\_\_\_\_
5. You will burn yourself \_\_\_\_\_
6. If you are late for school \_\_\_\_\_
7. If you practice the piano every night \_\_\_\_\_
8. If you don't finish your dinner \_\_\_\_\_
9. If you behave nicely \_\_\_\_\_
10. I will pay you ten dollars \_\_\_\_\_

- a. if you baby sit your little sister tonight.
- b. the teacher will keep you in after class.
- c. I won't let you have any dessert.
- d. I will buy you a treat.
- e. you will be healthy.
- f. you will play beautifully.
- g. you will fail your exam.
- h. your teeth will hurt.
- i. if you watch a scary movie before bed.
- j. if you play with matches.

**Exercise 3.** First Conditional. Complete the following sentences using your own words.

1. If you don't water the plants, \_\_\_\_\_.
2. If you wash your wool clothes in hot water, \_\_\_\_\_.
3. If you eat too many sweets, \_\_\_\_\_.
4. If you don't wear sunscreen, \_\_\_\_\_.
5. I will read you a bedtime story if \_\_\_\_\_.
6. You will be punished if \_\_\_\_\_.
7. If you drive too fast, \_\_\_\_\_.
8. You'll be tired in the morning if \_\_\_\_\_.

**Exercise 4. Second Conditional. Matching Exercise.** Match the first part of the sentence on the left with the correct ending on the right.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. If I were hungry... _____            | A. if I were bald.                      |
| 2. If I were thirsty... _____           | B. if the neighbours were very noisy.   |
| 3. I would go to the dentist... _____   | C. I would take it again.               |
| 4. I would buy a wig... _____           | D. if I came to work late again.        |
| 5. I would quit my job... _____         | E. I would eat something.               |
| 6. If I saw a bad car accident... _____ | F. if I had to work overtime every day. |
| 7. I would move... _____                | G. I would move to Mexico.              |
| 8. If I spoke Spanish... _____          | H. I would make some lemonade.          |
| 9. If I failed the course... _____      | I. I would call an ambulance.           |
| 10. The boss would fire me... _____     | J. if I had a tooth ache.               |

**Exercise 5. Second Conditional. Sentence Completion.** Complete the following sentences using your own words.

- If I had some free time, \_\_\_\_\_.
- I would move to a bigger apartment if \_\_\_\_\_.
- If I had a bike, \_\_\_\_\_.
- I would walk to school every day if \_\_\_\_\_.
- I would go to the doctor if \_\_\_\_\_.
- If I had a roommate, \_\_\_\_\_.
- If I knew his name, \_\_\_\_\_.
- If I had a dog, \_\_\_\_\_.

**Exercise 6. Third Conditional.** Complete the following sentences using the correct form of the verbs provided.

- Kevin caught the bus on time, but if he \_\_\_\_\_ (miss) the bus, he \_\_\_\_\_ (be) late for his appointment.
- Bob didn't write to me when he was on vacation, but if he \_\_\_\_\_ (know) my address, he \_\_\_\_\_ (send) me a postcard.
- We didn't buy the car because it was too expensive, but if it \_\_\_\_\_ (be) a little cheaper, we \_\_\_\_\_ (buy) it.
- They didn't go to her party, but if she \_\_\_\_\_ (invite) them, they \_\_\_\_\_ (go).
- I didn't know that Dave was in the hospital last week. If I \_\_\_\_\_ (know), I \_\_\_\_\_ (visit) him.
- It was cold yesterday, but if it \_\_\_\_\_ (be) warmer, we \_\_\_\_\_ (go) to the beach.
- I felt a little sick last night. If I \_\_\_\_\_ (feel) better, I \_\_\_\_\_ (go) to the movie with you.
- Jane didn't understand the homework. If she \_\_\_\_\_ (listen) to the teacher's instructions, she \_\_\_\_\_ (know) what to do.
- I'm sorry I was late. I forgot to set my alarm clock last night. If the alarm clock \_\_\_\_\_ (ring), I \_\_\_\_\_ (get) to the meeting on time.
- The hockey tickets were all sold out. If there \_\_\_\_\_ (be) a ticket available, I \_\_\_\_\_ (go) to the game.

**Exercise 7.** Third Conditional. Write a sentence for each of the following situations.

1. They didn't arrive on time because they took the wrong road. \_\_\_\_\_

2. Andrew didn't get the job because he didn't have much experience. \_\_\_\_\_

3. Ellen didn't pass her driver's test because she didn't stop at the red light. \_\_\_\_\_

4. Barbara didn't buy the dress because it didn't fit. \_\_\_\_\_

5. The Smiths didn't go to Hawaii for their vacation because the airplane tickets were too expensive. \_\_\_\_\_

6. I got a parking ticket because I forgot to put money in the parking meter. \_\_\_\_\_

7. The cake burned because she didn't set the timer on the stove. \_\_\_\_\_

8. She didn't take an umbrella because she didn't know it was supposed to rain. \_\_\_\_\_

9. Annie didn't eat her dinner because she wasn't hungry. \_\_\_\_\_

10. We didn't go skiing last weekend because there wasn't much snow on the mountain. \_\_\_\_\_

**Exercise 8.** Finish the sentences with a clause in the correct conditional:

1. If it is sunny tomorrow \_\_\_\_\_

2. If you sit in the sun too long \_\_\_\_\_

3. If I were you \_\_\_\_\_

4. If I were the Prime Minister \_\_\_\_\_

5. If she had studied harder \_\_\_\_\_

6. If I won the lottery \_\_\_\_\_

7. If I hadn't gone to bed so late \_\_\_\_\_

8. If I hadn't come to London \_\_\_\_\_

9. If you mix water and electricity \_\_\_\_\_

10. If she hadn't stayed at home \_\_\_\_\_

11. If I go out tonight \_\_\_\_\_

12. If I were on holiday today \_\_\_\_\_

13. If I had listened to my mother \_\_\_\_\_

14. If I hadn't eaten so much \_\_\_\_\_

15. If it rains later \_\_\_\_\_

16. If I were British \_\_\_\_\_

17. If I were the opposite sex \_\_\_\_\_

18. If I have enough money \_\_\_\_\_

19. If you don't wear a coat in the winter \_\_\_\_\_

20. If I weren't studying English \_\_\_\_\_



**Exercise 9.** First, Second and Third Conditional. Put the verbs in brackets in correct tenses.

- 1.If you (find) a skeleton in the cellar don't mention it to anyone.
- 2.If you pass your examination we (have) a celebration.
- 3.What (happen) if I press this button?
4. I should have voted for her if I (have) a vote then.
- 5.If you go to Paris where you (stay)?
- 6.If someone offered to buy you one of those rings, which you (choose)?
- 7.The flight may be cancelled if the fog (get) thick.
8. If the milkman (come) tell him to leave two pints.
9. Someone (sit) on your glasses if you leave them there.
10. You would play better bridge if you (not talk) so much.
- 11.What I (do) if I hear the burglar alarm?
- 12.If you (read) the instruction carefully you wouldn't have answered the wrong question.
- 13.I could repair the roof myself if I (have) a long ladder.
- 14.Unless they turn that radio off I (go) mad.
- 15.If you were made redundant what you (do)?
- 16.We'll have a long way to walk if we (run) out of petrol here.
- 17.If you shake that bottle of port it (not be) fit to drink.
18. I'll probably get lost unless he (come) with me.
19. You (not have) so many accidents if you drove more slowly.
20. If you (wear) a false beard nobody would have recognized you.
- 21.If she (leave) the fish there the cat will get it.
- 22.Unless they leave a lamp beside that hole in the road somebody (fall)
- 23.You'll get pneumonia if you (not change) your wet clothes.
- 24.If I had known that you couldn't eat octopus I (not buy) it.
- 25.If they (hang) that picture lower people would be able to see it.
- 26.She (be able) to walk faster of her shoes hadn't such high heels.
- 27.I (bring) you some beer if I had known that you were thirsty.
- 28.If you had touched that electric cable you (be) electrocuted.
- 29.If the story hadn't been true the newspaper (not print) it.
30. I (not buy) things on the installment system if I were you.
31. Dial 999 if you (want) Police, Ambulance, or Fire Brigade.
32. You (not be) any use to me unless you learn to type.