

Conditional Clauses

Zero conditional

When we talk about things that are generally or always true, we can use:

If/When/Unless plus a present form PLUS present simple or imperative

Eg. If he gets there before me, ask him to wait.
When you fly budget airline, you have to pay for your drinks and snacks.
Unless you need more space, a small car is big enough for one person.

Note that we are not talking about a specific event but something which is generally true.

In the condition clause, we can use a variety of present forms. In the result clause, there can only be the present simple or imperative.

Eg. If you visit London, go on the London Eye.
If unemployment is rising, people tend to stay in their present jobs.
If you've done that, go and have a coffee.
When you go on holiday, take plenty of sun cream. It'll be very hot.
When I'm concentrating, please don't make so much noise.
When I've finished an article, I always ask Kate to read it through.

Notice that 'unless' means the same as 'if not'.

Eg. Unless he asks you politely, refuse to do any more work on the project.
Unless prices are rising, it's not a good investment.
Unless you've been there yourself, you don't really understand how fantastic it is.

The first conditional

We use the First Conditional to talk about future events that are likely to happen.

Eg. If we take John, he'll be really pleased.
If you give me some money, I'll pay you back tomorrow.
If they tell us they want it, we'll have to give it to them.
If Mary comes, she'll want to drive.

The 'if' clause can be used with different present forms.

Eg. If I go to New York again, I'll buy you a souvenir from the Empire State Building.
If she hasn't heard the bad news yet, I'll tell her.

The "future clause" can contain 'going to' or the future perfect as well as 'will'.

Eg. If I see him, I'm going to tell him exactly how angry I am.
If we don't get the contract, we'll have wasted a lot of time and money.

The "future clause" can also contain other modal verbs such as 'can' and 'must'.

Eg. If you go to New York, you must have the cheesecake in Lindy's.

If he comes, you can get a lift home with him.

Second conditional

The Second Conditional is used to talk about 'impossible' situations.

Eg. If we were in London today, we would be able to go to the concert Hyde Park.
If I had millions dollars, I'd give a lot to charity.
If there were no hungry people in this world, it would be a much better place.
If everyone had clean water to drink, there would be a lot less disease.

Note that after I / he/ she /it we often use the subjunctive form 'were' and not 'was'. (Some people think that 'were' is the only 'correct' form but other people think 'was' is equally 'correct' .)

Eg. If she were happy in her job, she wouldn't be looking for another one.
If I lived in Japan, I'd have sushi every day.
If they were to enter our market, we'd have big problems.

Note the form 'If I were you' which is often used to give advice.

Eg. If I were you, I'd look for a new place to live.
If I were you, I'd go back to school and get more qualifications.

The Second Conditional is also used to talk about 'unlikely' situations.

Eg. If I went to China, I'd visit the Great Wall.
If I was the President, I'd reduce taxes.
If you were in my position, you'd understand.

Note that the choice between the first and the second conditional is often a question of the speaker's attitude rather than of facts.

Compare these examples.

Joy thinks these things are possible, Peter doesn't.

Joy – If I win the lottery, I'll buy a big house.

Peter – If I won the lottery, I'd buy a big house.

Joy – If I get promoted, I'll throw a big party.

Peter – If I got promoted, I'd throw a big party.

Joy – If my team win the Cup, I'll buy champagne for everybody.

Peter – If my team won the Cup, I'd buy champagne for everybody.

Note that the 'If clause' can contain the past simple or the past continuous.

Eg. If I was still working in Delhi, I would commute by train.
If she were coming, she would be here by now.

If they were thinking of selling, I would want to buy.

Note that the main clause can contain 'would' 'could' or 'might'.

Eg. If I had the chance to do it again, I would do it differently.

If we met up for lunch, we could go to that new restaurant.

If I spoke to him directly, I might be able to persuade him.

Also note that sometimes the 'if clause' is implied rather than spoken.

Eg. What would I do without you? ("if you weren't here")

Where would I get one at this time of night? ("if I wanted one")

He wouldn't agree. ("if I asked him")

Third conditional

We can use the Third Conditional to talk about 'impossible' conditions, impossible because they are in the past and we cannot change what has happened.

Eg. If I had worked harder at school, I would have got better grades.

If I had had time, I would have gone to see him. But I didn't have time.

If we had bought that house, we would have had to rebuild the kitchen.

If we had caught the earlier train, we would have got there on time but we were late.

Notice that the main clause can contain 'would', 'could' or 'might'.

Eg. If I had seen him at the meeting, I would have asked him. (But he hasn't there so I didn't.)

If I had seen him at the meeting, I could have asked him. (But he wasn't there so it wasn't possible.)

If I had seen him at the meeting, I might have asked him. (But I'm not sure. Perhaps if the opportunity had arisen.)

If I had paid more attention in class, I would have understood the lesson.

Exercise

Give suitable words to fill in:

- 1) If you like, you ----- for two days.
- 2) If I ----- the film in the cinema, I wouldn't have watched it on TV again.
- 3) If the parents bought the cat, their children ---
- very happy.
- 4) Metal ----- if you heat it.
- 5) He ----- my e-mail if he'd been online yesterday evening.
- 6) They'd have been able to return the bottle if they----- the labels.
- 7) If she ----- up her room, she must find the receipt.
- 8) What ----- if you had a million dollars.
- 9) Where would you live if you----- younger.
- 10) If you ----- for a little moment, I'll tell the doctor you are here.

Answers

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| 1. can stay | 2. had seen | 3. would be |
| 4. expands | 5. should have received | |
| 6. hadn't torn off | 7. tidies up | 8. would you do |
| 9. were | 10. will wait | |