21 The conditional

The conditional tenses

219 The present conditional tense

A This is formed with **would/should** + infinitive for the first person and **would** + infinitive for the other persons.

Affirmative
    I would/I'd work or *I should work*
    you would/you'd work etc.

Negative
    I would not/wouldn't work or
    I should not/shouldn't work
    you would not/wouldn't work etc.

Interrogative
    would/should I work?
    would you work? etc.

Negative interrogative
    should I not/shouldn't I work?
    would you not/wouldn't you work? etc.

B It is used:
  (a) In conditional sentences (see 221-9).
  (b) In special uses of **would** and **should** (see chapter 22).
  (c) As a past equivalent of the future simple. **would/should** must be used instead of **will/shall** when the main verb of the sentence is in the past tense:

    I hope (that) I will/shall succeed.
    I hoped (that) I would/should succeed.
    I know (that) he will be in time.
    I knew (that) he would be in time.
    He thinks (that) they will give him a visa.
    He thought (that) they would give him a visa.
    I expect (that) the plane will be diverted.
    I expected (that) the plane would be diverted.

  (For **will/shall**, **would/should** in indirect speech, see chapter 31.)

220 The perfect conditional tense

A This is formed with **would/should** and the perfect infinitive:

Affirmative
    I would/should have worked
    you would have worked etc.

Negative
    I would not/should not have worked? etc.

Interrogative
    would/should I have worked? etc.

Negative interrogative
    should I not have/shouldn't I have worked?
    would you not have/wouldn't you have worked? etc.

Other contractions as in 219.

B It is used:
  (a) In conditional sentences (see 221-9).
  (b) In special uses of **would** and **should** (see 230-7).
  (c) As a past equivalent of the future perfect tense:
    I hope he will have finished before we get back.
    I hoped he would have finished before we got back.

Conditional sentences

— Conditional sentences have two parts: the if-clause and the main clause. In the sentence *If it rains I shall stay at home* 'If it rains' is the if-clause, and 'I shall stay at home' is the main clause.
There are three kinds of conditional sentences. Each kind contains a different pair of tenses. With each type certain variations are possible but students who are studying the conditional for the first time should ignore these and concentrate on the basic forms.

221 Conditional sentences type 1: probable

A The verb in the if-clause is in the present tense; the verb in the main clause is in the future simple. It doesn't matter which comes first.
    If he runs he'll get there in time.
    The cat will scratch you if you pull her tail.
This type of sentence implies that the action in the if-clause is quite probable.
Note that the meaning here is present or future; but the verb in the if-clause is in a present, not a future tense. **if + will/would** is only possible with certain special meanings. (See 224.)

B Possible variations of the basic form
1 Variations of the main clause
Instead of **if + present + future**, we may have:
  (a) **if + present + may/might** (possibility)
    If your documents are in order you may/can leave at once
    If the fog gets thicker the plane may/might be diverted. (Perhaps the plane will be diverted.)
  (b) **if + present + may/can** (permission)
    If it stops snowing we can go out. (permission or possibility) or **can** (permission or possibility)
  (c) **if + present + must**, **should** or any expression of command, request or advice
    If you want to lose weight you must/should eat less bread.
    If you want to lose weight you had better eat less bread.
    If you want to lose weight eat less bread.
    If you see Tom tomorrow could you ask him to ring me?

(d) if + present + another present tense
if + two present tenses is used to express automatic or habitual results:

If you heat ice it turns to water. (*will turn* is also possible.)
If there is a shortage of any product prices of that product go up.

(e) When *if* is used to mean *as/since* (see 338 A), a variety of tenses can be used in the main clause:

Ann hates London. ~ *If she hates it why does she live there?/she ought to move out.* (*If* so could replace *If she hates it* here.)

This is not, of course, a true conditional clause.

2 Variations of the if-clause
Instead of *if* + present tense, we can have:
(a) *if* + present continuous, to indicate a present action or a future arrangement

If you are waiting for a bus (present action) *you'd better join the queue.*
If you are looking for Peter (present action) *you'll find him upstairs.*
If you are staying for another night (future arrangement) *I'll ask the manager to give you a better room.*

(b) *if* + present perfect
If you have finished dinner I'll ask the waiter for the bill.
If he has written the letter I'll post it.
If they haven't seen the museum we'd better go there today.

222 Conditional sentences type 2

A The verb in the if-clause is in the past tense; the verb in the main clause is in the conditional tense:

If I had a map I would lend it to you. (But I haven't a map. The meaning here is present.)
If someone tried to blackmail me I would tell the police. (But I don't expect that anyone will try to blackmail me. The meaning here is future.)

There is no difference in time between the first and second types of conditional sentence. Type 2, like type 1, refers to the present or future, and the past tense in the if-clause is not a true past but a subjunctive, which indicates unreality (as in the first example above) or improbability (as in the second example above).

B Type 2 is used:
1 When the supposition is contrary to known facts:
If I lived near my office I'd be in time for work. (But I don't live near my office.)
If I were you I'd plant some trees round the house. (But I am not you.)

---

2 When we don't expect the action in the if-clause to take place:
If a burglar came into my room at night I'd scream. (But I don't expect a burglar to come in.)
If I dyed my hair blue everyone would laugh at me. (But I don't intend to dye it.)

Some if-clauses can have either of the above meanings:
If he left his bicycle outside someone would steal it.
'*If he left his bicycle*' could imply 'but he doesn't' (present meaning, as in 1 above) or 'but he doesn't intend to' (future meaning, as in 2). But the correct meaning is usually clear from the text.

Ambiguity of this kind can be avoided by using *were/was* + infinitive instead of the past tense in type 2.

if he/she/it were can be used instead of *if he/she/it was*, and is considered the more correct form:
If he were to resign . . . = If he resigned . . .
If I were to succeed . . . = If I succeeded . . .

This construction with *were* is chiefly found in fairly formal sentences. *if he/she/it was* + infinitive is possible in colloquial English, but the past tense, as shown above, is much more usual.

3 Sometimes, rather confusingly, type 2 can be used as an alternative to type 1 for perfectly possible plans and suggestions:
Will Mary be in time if she gets the ten o'clock bus? ~
No, but she'd be in time if she got the nine-thirty bus or
No, but she'll be in time if she gets the nine-thirty bus.
We'll never save £200! ~ If we each saved £10 a week we'd do it in ten weeks.

or
If we each save £10 a week we'll do it in ten weeks.

A suggestion in type 2 is a little more polite than a suggestion in type 1, just as *would you* is a more polite request form than *will you*. But the student needn't trouble too much over this use of type 2.

C Possible variations of the basic form
1 Variations of the main clause
(a) *might* or *could* may be used instead of *would*:
If you tried again you would succeed. (certain result)
If you tried again you might succeed. (possible result)
If I knew her number I could ring her up. (ability)
If he had a permit he could get a job. (ability or permission)
(b) The continuous conditional form may be used instead of the simple conditional form:
Peter is on holiday; he is touring Italy. ~ *If I were on holiday I would/might be touring Italy too.*
(c) *if* + past tense can be followed by another past tense when we wish to express automatic or habitual reactions in the past; compare *if* + two present tenses, 221 B1(d). Note that the past tenses here have a past meaning:

If anyone interrupted him he got angry. (whenever anyone interrupted him)

If there was a scarcity of anything prices of that thing went up.

(d) When if is used to mean 'as' or 'since', a variety of tenses is possible in the main clause. if + past tense here has a past meaning. The sentence is not a true conditional.

The pills made him dizzy. All the same he bought/has bought/is buying some more. ~ If they made him dizzy why did he buy/has he bought/is he buying more?

I knew she was short of money. ~ If you knew she was short of money you should have lent her some./why didn't you lend her some?

2 Variations of the if-clause

Instead of if + simple past we can have:

(a) if + past continuous

(We're going by air and) I hate flying. If we were going by boat I'd feel much happier.

If my car was working I would/could drive you to the station.

(b) if + past perfect

If he had taken my advice he would be a rich man now.

(This is a mixture of types 2 and 3. For more examples, see 223.)

(For if + would, see 224.)

223 Conditional sentences type 3

A The verb in the if-clause is in the past perfect tense; the verb in the main clause is in the perfect conditional. The time is past and the condition cannot be fulfilled because the action in the if-clause didn't happen.

If I had known that you were coming I would have met you at the airport. (But I didn't know, so I didn't come.)

If he had tried to leave the country he would have been stopped at the frontier. (But he didn't try.)

B Possible variations of the basic form

1 could or might may be used instead of would:

If we had found him earlier we could have saved his life. (ability)

If we had found him earlier we might have saved his life. (possibility)

If our documents had been in order we could have left at once. (ability or permission)

2 The continuous form of the perfect conditional may be used:

At the time of the accident I was sitting in the back of the car, because Tom's little boy was sitting beside him in front. If Tom's little boy had not been there I would have been sitting in front.

3 We can use the past perfect continuous in the if-clause:

I was wearing a seat belt. If I hadn't been wearing one I'd have been seriously injured.

4 A combination of types 2 and 3 is possible:

The plane I intended to catch crashed and everyone was killed. If I had caught that plane I would be dead now or

I would have been killed. (type 3)

If I had worked harder at school I would be sitting in a comfortable office now; I wouldn't be sweeping the streets. (But I didn't work hard at school and now I am sweeping the streets.)

5 had can be placed first and the if omitted:

If you had obeyed orders this disaster would not have happened =

Had you obeyed orders this disaster would not have happened.

224 Special uses of will/would and should in if-clauses

Normally these auxiliaries are not used after if in conditional sentences. There are, however, certain exceptions.

A if you will/would is often used in polite requests. would is the more polite form.

If you will/would wait a moment I'll see if Mr Jones is free. (Please wait.)

I would be very grateful if you would make the arrangements for me.

if you would + infinitive is often used alone when the request is one which would normally be made in the circumstances. The speaker assumes that the other person will comply as a matter of course.

If you'd fill up this form.

(in a hotel) If you'd just sign the register.

(in a shop) If you'd put your address on the back of the cheque.

(in a classroom) If you'd open your books.

B if + will/would can be used with all persons to indicate willingness:

If he'll listen to me I'll be able to help him. (If he is willing to listen . . . .)

If Tom would tell me what he wants for his dinner I'd cook it for him. (The speaker implies that Tom is unwilling to tell her.)

won't used in this way can mean 'refuse':

If he won't listen to me I can't help him. (If he is unwilling to listen/If he refuses to listen. . . .)

If they won't accept a cheque we'll have to pay cash. (If they refuse to accept . . .)

C will can be used to express obstinate insistence (230 B):

If you will play the drums all night no wonder the neighbours complain. (If you insist on playing . . .)

D if + would like/care can be used instead of if + want/wish and is more polite:

If you would like to come I'll get a ticket for you.

If you'd care to see the photographs I'll bring them round.

If he'd like to leave his car here he can.

But if we rearrange such sentences so that would like has no object, we can drop the would:

If you like I'll get a ticket for you but
If you'd like a ticket I'll get one for you.
If he likes he can leave his car here but
If he'd like to leave his car here he can or
He can leave it here if he'd like to.

E if + should can be used in type 1 to indicate that the action, though possible, is not very likely. It is usually combined with an imperative and is chiefly used in written instructions:

If you should have any difficulty in getting spare parts ring this number.
If these biscuits should arrive in a damaged condition please inform the factory at once.

~ should can be placed first and the if omitted: . . . (See 225 B.)

Should these biscuits arrive . . . (See 225 B.)

225 if + were and inversion of subject and auxiliary

A if + were instead of if + was

1 Usually either can be used, were being more likely in formal English:
If she was/were offered the job she'd take it.
If Tom was/were here he'd know what to do.

2 But were is a little more usual than was in the advice form If I were/was you I would/should . . . :
'If I were you I would wait a bit,' he said. (See 287 C.)
were is also more usual in the infinitive construction:
If Peter were/was to apply for the post he'd get it. (See 222 B.)

3 were, not was, is used when the auxiliary is placed first:
Were I Tom I would refuse. (See B below.)
When if means 'since' (see 222 C) was cannot be replaced by were. were can replace was after if only (see 228) and wish (see 300).

B if + subject + auxiliary can be replaced in formal English by inversion of auxiliary and subject with if omitted:
If I were in his shoes . . . = Were I in his shoes . . .
If you should require anything . . . = Should you require anything . . .
If he had known . . . = Had he known . . .

226 if, even if, whether, unless, but for, otherwise, provided, suppose

A even if = even though
Compare:
You must go tomorrow if you are ready and
You must go tomorrow even if you aren't ready.

B whether . . . or = if . . . or
You must go tomorrow whether you are ready or not.

C unless + affirmative verb = if + negative
Unless you start at once you'll be late =
If you don't start at once you'll be late.
Unless you had a permit you couldn't get a job =
If you hadn't a permit you couldn't get a job.
Note the difference between:
(a) Don't call me if you need help and
(b) Don't call me unless you need help.
In (a) he won't help her even if she needs help.
In (b) he will help her if she needs help but doesn't want non-urgent calls.
unless + he'd/you'd like/prefer etc. normally replaces if he/you wouldn't like etc.:
I'll ask Tom, unless you'd prefer me to ask/unless you'd rather I asked Bill.

D but for = 'if it were not for/if it hadn't been for'
My father pays my fees. But for that I wouldn't be here.
The car broke down. But for that we would have been in time.

E otherwise = 'if this doesn't happen/didn't happen/hadn't happened'
We must be back before midnight; otherwise we'll be locked out =
If we are not back by midnight we'll be locked out.
Her father pays her fees; otherwise she wouldn't be here =
If her father didn't pay her fees she wouldn't be here.
I used my calculator; otherwise I'd have taken longer =
If I hadn't used my calculator I'd have taken longer.

F In colloquial English or (+ else) can often replace otherwise:
We must be early or (else) we won't get a seat.

G provided (that) can replace if when there is a strong idea of limitation or restriction. It is chiefly used with permission.
You can camp here provided you leave no mess.

H suppose/supposing . . . ? = what if . . . ?
Suppose the plane is late? =
What if/What will happen if the plane is late?
Suppose no one had been there? =
What if no one had been there?
suppose can also introduce suggestions:
Suppose you ask him/Why don't you ask him?

227 if and in case

A in case is followed by a present or past tense or by should (see 337). It appears similar to if and is often confused with it. But the two are completely different.

An in case clause gives a reason for the action in the main clause:
Some cyclists carry repair outfits in case they have a puncture =
Some cyclists carry repair outfits because they may have/because it is possible they will have a puncture.
I always slept by the phone in case he rang during the night –
I always slept by the phone because (I knew) he might ring during the night.

An in case clause can be dropped without changing the meaning of the main clause. In a conditional sentence, however, the action in the main clause depends on the action in the if-clause, and if the if-clause is dropped the meaning of the main clause changes. Compare:

(a) BILL: I'll come tomorrow in case Ann wants me and
(b) TOM: I'll come tomorrow if Ann wants me.

In (a) perhaps Ann will want Bill, perhaps she won't. But Bill will come anyway. His action doesn't depend on Ann's. in case Ann wants me could be omitted without changing the meaning of the main verb.
In (b), a conditional sentence. Tom will only come if Ann wants him. His action depends on hers. We cannot remove if Ann wants me without changing the meaning of the main verb.

B An in case clause is normally placed after the main clause, not before it. Note, however, that in case of + noun – if there is a/an + noun:
In case of accident phone 999 = If there is an accident phone 999.
This may have led to the confusion of if-clauses and in case clauses.

228 if only

only can be placed after if and indicates hope, a wish or regret, according to the tense used with it.

A if only + present tense/will expresses hope:
If only he comes in time –
We hope he will come in time.
If only he will listen to her =
We hope he will be willing to listen to her.

B if only + past/past perfect expresses regret (see also wish + past/past perfect, 300):
If only he didn't smoke! –
We wish he didn't smoke or We are sorry he smokes.
If only (= I/We wish) Tom were here!
If only you hadn't said, 'Liar'! =
We wish you hadn't said, 'Liar'/We are sorry you said, 'Liar'.

C if only + would can express regret about a present action as an alternative to if only + past tense (it has the same meaning as wish + would):
If only he would drive more slowly! =
We are sorry that he isn't willing to drive more slowly
or a not very hopeful wish concerning the future:

If only (= I/We wish) the rain would stop! (We don't really expect it to stop.)
(See also wish, 300-1.)
if only clauses can stand alone as above or form part of a full conditional sentence.

229 Conditional sentences in indirect speech

A Type 1, basic form. The tenses here change in the usual way:
He said, 'If I catch the plane I'll be home by five' –
He said that if he caught the plane he would be home by five.
Type 2, basic form. No tense changes:
'If I had a permit I could get a job,' he said =
He said that if he had a permit he could get a job.
Type 3, basic form. No tense changes:
'If she had loved Tom,' he said, 'she wouldn't have left him' =
He said that if she had loved Tom she wouldn't have left him.

B Examples of if-clauses + commands and requests in indirect speech (see also 320-1):
He said, 'If you have time wash the floor' or
He said, 'If you have time would you wash the floor?' =
He told/asked me to wash the floor if I had time (note change of order) or
He said that if I had time I was to wash the floor.

'If you see Ann ask her to ring me,' he said –
He said that if I saw Ann I was to ask her to ring him.
(The infinitive construction here would be clumsy and less clear.)

PETER (on phone): If you miss the last bus get a taxi –
Peter says that if we miss the last bus we are to get a taxi. (The infinitive construction would be much less usual here.)
(For if you would . . . requests, see 284 F.)

C if-clauses + expressions of advice in indirect speech:
'If you feel ill,' she said, 'why don't you go to bed?' or
'. . . you'd better go to bed' =
She advised me to go to bed if I felt ill or
She said that if I felt ill I'd better/I should go to bed.
'If I were you I'd stop taking pills,' she said =
She advised me to stop taking pills.

D if-clauses + questions are usually reported with the if-clause last:
'If the baby is a girl what will they call her?' he wondered =
He wondered what they would call the baby if it was a girl.
'If the door is locked what shall I do?' she asked =
She asked what she should/was to do if the door was locked.