

Essential Grammars

Conditionals

Conditional Sentences

Conditional structures are used to talk about a condition and a possible result or consequence. The condition is something that must happen first in order for something else to happen as a result or consequence. Conditionals are complex sentences, which consist of an if-clause, followed by a main clause. Either clause can be positive or negative

1) First conditional

Nature: Open condition, what is said in the condition is possible.

Time: This condition refers either to present or to future time.

e.g. If he is late, we will have to go without him.

If my mother knows about this, we are in serious trouble.

First conditional is used to talk about future situations based on conditions. We use the present tense in the if-clause and a future form in the main clause:

If the world **continues** to burn fossil fuels at the current rate, global warming **will rise** to two degrees Celsius by 2036.

We can use might, may, or could instead of will to suggest something is less probable:

If it's foggy tonight, the plane **may** be late.

or can to mean sometimes:

If you **travel** on weekends, the roads **can be** very crowded. (this sometimes happens)

2) Second conditional

Nature: unreal (impossible) or improbable situations.

Time: present; the TENSE is past, but we are talking about the present, now.

e.g. If I knew her name, I would tell you.

If I were you, I would tell my father.

Compare: If I become president, I will change the social security system. (Said by a presidential candidate)

If I became president, I would change the social security system. (Said by a schoolboy: improbable)

If I won a million pounds, I would stop teaching. (improbable)

Second conditional is used to talk about something that's imaginary, impossible or unlikely in the present or future. The past tense in the if-clause does not refer to past time:

If I won £100,000, I **would give up** my job.

Note: with the verb **be** we can use **was** or **were** with I/he/she/it:

If I **were/was** you, I **would buy** a car.

We can use was/were + infinitive to refer to an improbable action:

If I **were to win** one million dollars, I **would give up** my job.

1) Third conditional

Nature: unreal

Time: Past (so we are talking about a situation that was not so in the past.)

e.g. If you had warned me, I would not have told your father about that party.(But you didn't, and I have).

Third conditional is used to speculate about past events. It is often used to express regret or to imagine the result of something that did not happen:

If she *had been* in her office, I *would have seen* her. (= she was not in her office so I didn't see her)

In the main clause we can use *might* or *could* to say that something was less certain:

If I'd asked her, she *might have helped* me. (possibility)

4) Mixed conditional

Mixed conditional is used to express the present result of a past situation or explain how a present situation affected a past action. To do this we use a combination of second and third conditionals.

The present result of an imagined situation or action in the past (past situation + present result):

If I'd taken the medication as prescribed, I **wouldn't** be still sick. (= I didn't take the medication as prescribed so now I am still sick)

The past result of an imagined situation in the present (present situation + past result):

If I **had** more confidence, I **would have got** the job. (= I don't have enough confidence so I didn't get the job)

The future result of an imagined situation or action in the past (past situation + future result):

If I **hadn't broken** my leg, I'd **be playing** football later. (= I did break my leg so I am not playing football later)

The present result of an imagined situation or action in the future (future situation + present result):

If I **wasn't meeting** my mentor later, I'd **be** on vacation now. (= I am meeting my mentor later, so I'm not on vacation now)

The future result of an imagined situation in the present (present situation + future result):

If I **was** in London, I'd **be going** to Trafalgar Square tomorrow because it's St Patrick's Day. (= I am not in London, so I won't be going to Trafalgar Square tomorrow)