9

Conditionals and Wishes

Conditional sentences link a condition (*if*-clause) to a result (main clause). English distinguishes real from unreal conditions by shifting the tenses "one step back".

9.1 The four classic patterns

	If-clause	Main clause	Meaning
Zero	present simple	present simple	general truths
First	present simple	*will* + base	real future possibility
Second	past simple	*would* + base	unreal/unlikely present or future
Third	past perfect	*would have* + participle	unreal past

9.1.1 Zero conditional

*If you **heat** ice, it **melts**. If I **drink** coffee late, I **can't sleep**.* (*if* ≈ *whenever*)

9.1.2 First conditional

*If it **rains**, we'**ll cancel** the picnic. If you **finish** early, **call** me. If she **doesn't hurry**, she **may miss** the flight.*

Common Error

No *will* inside the *if*-clause: ✗ *If it will rain, we'll cancel.* → ✓ *If it rains, we'll cancel.* (Exception: polite requests — *If you **will** wait here, the doctor will see you shortly.*)

9.1.3 Second conditional

*If I **had** more time, I **would learn** the piano. If she **lived** closer, we **would see** her more often. What **would** you **do** if you **won** the lottery?*

The past tense here does not mean past time — it marks *unreality*. Compare: *If I **get** the job, I'll move* (realistic — first) vs. *If I **got** the job, I'd move* (speculative — second).

Usage Note

In careful and formal style, use *were* for all persons in unreal conditions: *If I **were** you, I'd accept. If he **were** taller…* Informal *If I was you* is common in speech but avoid it in writing. *If I were you* is the standard formula for advice.

9.1.4 Third conditional

*If you **had told** me, I **would have helped**. If the driver **hadn't braked**, there **would have been** an accident. She **wouldn't have met** him if she **hadn't gone** to that party.*

Common Error

Keep *would* out of the *if*-clause: ✗ *If you would have asked me, I would have said yes.* → ✓ *If you had asked me, I would have said yes.*

9.2 Variations on the classic patterns

- Other modals in the result: *If you finish early, we **can** go out. If he trained harder, he **might** win.*
- *unless* = *if . . . not*: *We'll be late **unless** we leave now.*
- *as long as, provided (that), on condition that* = emphatic *if*: *You can borrow it **as long as** you return it by Monday.*
- *in case* = as a precaution (not a condition): *Take an umbrella **in case** it rains.* (you take it *before* knowing)
- *if so / if not*: *You may already have paid; **if so**, please ignore this letter.*

Mixed conditionals and inverted conditionals (*Had I known. . .*) are treated in Chapter 17.

9.3 *wish* and *if only*

Pattern	Meaning and examples
wish + past simple	regret about the present: *I **wish I had** more free time. I **wish I were** taller.*
wish + past perfect	regret about the past: *I **wish I hadn't said** that. She **wishes she had studied** medicine.*
wish + would	complaint about another's behaviour or desire for change: *I **wish you would stop** interrupting. I **wish it would stop** raining.*

If only is an emphatic *wish*: ***If only** I had listened!*

Common Error

✗ *I wish I would be taller.* → ✓ *I wish I were taller.* (*wish + would* is not used about oneself or plain states)
✗ *I wish I have more money.* → ✓ *I wish I had more money.* (one step back, always)

9.4 *hope* vs. *wish*

Hope is for realistic desires and takes ordinary tenses: *I **hope** you **pass** / **will pass** the exam. Wish* + clause is counterfactual: *I **wish** you **had passed**.* For good wishes with a noun, use *wish + two objects*: *We wish you a merry Christmas / every success.*

Exercises

Exercise 9.1 Identify and complete

Put the verbs in the correct form and name the conditional type.

1. If we _____ (leave) now, we'll catch the 5:40.
2. If metal _____ (get) hot, it expands.
3. If I _____ (be) the minister, I would cut taxes.
4. If you _____ (warn) me, I wouldn't have signed the contract.
5. She _____ (not/be) so tired if she went to bed earlier.

Exercise 9.2 Rewrite

Rewrite each sentence using the word in brackets, keeping the meaning.

1. We'll miss the train if we don't hurry. (unless)
2. I didn't know you were ill, so I didn't visit you. (If)
3. I regret not buying that house. (wish)
4. It annoys me that he leaves the door open. (wish)
5. Take some cash; the card machine may not work. (in case)

Exercise 9.3 Error correction

Correct one error in each sentence.

1. If I will see her, I'll pass on the message.
2. If you would have listened, you would have understood.
3. I wish I can speak Chinese.
4. Unless you don't apologize, she won't forgive you.
5. If he was here now, he'd know what to do. (make it formal)