

Conditionals (1)

If introduces a *condition* – something may or may not happen depending on the circumstances. Conditional sentences have a number of uses.

1 Stating a general rule

If can be used to say what generally happens when something else happens. Both verbs in this type of sentence are in the present simple tense:

If you **order** in bulk you usually **get** a discount.

If the paperwork **is** incomplete the goods **are** often held up.

2 Speculating about the future

If can also be used to speculate about the future consequences of a specific event. In this case, the verb in the second part of the sentence is preceded by *will*.

If I **do** an MBA I'll **improve** my job prospects.

If we **break into** the Indian market, our turnover **will increase** substantially.

If our main competitor **goes** bankrupt, we'll **increase** our market share.

The use of the present tense in the first part of the sentence indicates that the situation is *possible*; doing an MBA is feasible, breaking into the Indian market is seen as quite likely, the competitor may well go bankrupt.

Note that it is incorrect to use *will* with the first verb:

NOT *If I will do an MBA ...

3 *if* and *unless*

Unless often replaces *if ... + negative expression*:

If you don't wear a suit and tie you won't be allowed into the club.

You won't be allowed into the club **unless** you wear a suit and tie.

We'll stop the meeting now **if** there is nothing else to discuss.

We'll stop the meeting now **unless** there is something else to discuss.

4 Promising and threatening

Conditional statements can function as either promises, warnings or threats. (But note that *unless* cannot be used to make a promise.)

If you order now you'll get a free gift. (promise)

We **won't** be able to do business with you **unless** you comply with our ethical policy. (warning)

Unless we receive payment by the end of the week we **will** be forced to consider legal action. (threat)

Conditionals (2)

5 Imagining

If + past simple is used to refer to less probable situations. *Would / should / could / might* precede the verb in the subordinate clause:

If every piece of mail **was** personalised with your company logo or message, your customers **might** be very impressed.

Imagine what **would** happen **if** all the world's stock exchanges **crashed**.

If we **hired** a factoring agency we **could** recover our debts more easily.

It is possible to use *if I were* or *if I was* in both formal and informal styles:

If I **was** rich I **would buy** a Ferrari.

6 Bargaining

It is common to make hypothetical statements in negotiations. Compare:

a) If you **give** us a 5% discount **we'll** make a firm order of 5,000 units. (this is almost a promise)

b) If you **gave** us a 5% discount **we'd** make a firm order of 5,000 units. (this is a more tentative offer)

You may therefore want to use *if* + past verb + *would* as an opening move in a negotiation, in order to test the ground.

7 *Provided (that) / so long as / on condition (that)*

When stating a condition it is also possible to use *provided (that)*, *so long as* or *on condition (that)*.

It is not necessary to say or write *that*:

Provided (that) they **don't go** back on their offer, we'll sign the agreement next week.

We'll be happy to work with you **so long as** you pay half of the advertising costs.

We might be able to reduce the number of hours worked **on condition (that)** there is an increase in productivity.

Conditionals (3)

8 Speculating about the past

When talking about things which did not happen in the past (and the consequences if they had happened) we use *if* + past perfect together with *would* / *could* / *might* + *have* + past participle:

If the price / earnings ratio **had been** higher, I **would have bought** some shares.

If we **had anticipated** the crash, we **wouldn't have lost** so much money.

The merger **could have succeeded** if the management styles **hadn't been** so different.

The presentation **might have been** better if she **had felt** more confident.

Note that in American English *would have* is possible in both clauses:

I **would have told** you if I **would have known** earlier.

9 Mixed conditionals

Not all sentences containing *if* follow the same patterns as those presented on this page and on pages 34 and 36. The sequence of tenses depends on the meaning that has to be conveyed.

If Robert **wasn't** so lazy he **could have been** promoted. (he is permanently lazy which explains why he failed to get promotion)

If you **had set** off earlier you **would be** there by now. (this is true at the moment of speaking; the second part of the sentence does not refer to the past so *would have been* is incorrect)

If you **will come** this way I'll **show** you to Mrs Harvey's office. (*will* can be used after *if* in polite requests)

I'll **lend** you 1,000 euros if it'll **help** you set up your business. (there is nothing conditional about this sentence; the advantage is the result of the gift of money. Here *if* means *if it is true that*)

We **would** be grateful if you **would** send us your payment made out to the order of 'InfoMart'. (a polite request)

If the red light **comes on** then **turn off** the machine immediately.

If Mrs Olsen **calls**, **tell** her I'm in a meeting.

If you **need** it, **ask** for help. (the verbs in both parts of the sentence are in the present simple tense when giving a warning or instruction or when making an invitation)