



Conditional Sentences

A conditional sentence describes the condition that is necessary for a particular result to occur. The conjunctions *if*, *even if*, *when*, *whenever*, *whether*, and *unless* often appear in conditional sentences. The meaning of a conditional sentence determines which verb tenses need to be used in the independent and subordinate clauses.

- Use conditional sentences to express a general or habitual fact. In this type of conditional sentence, the verb tense in each clause is the same.

General fact: When I touch an ice cube, it feels cold.

Habitual fact: Whenever I touched an ice cube, it felt cold.

- Use conditional sentences to make predictions about the future, or express future intentions or possibilities. In this type of conditional sentence, the subordinate clause contains a present-tense verb and the independent clause contains the modal *can*, *may*, *might*, *should*, or *will* plus the base form of the verb.

Prediction: If I win the lottery, I can go to Paris.

Intention: If I win the lottery, I will go to Paris.

Possibility: If I win the lottery, I might go to Paris.

- Use conditional sentences to speculate about the future result of a possible but unlikely condition in the present. In this type of conditional sentence, the subordinate clause contains the past tense of the verb, and the independent clause contains the modal *would*, *could*, or *might*, plus the base form of the verb.

Speculation: If I won the lottery, I would go to Paris.

Unlikely present condition: If I won the lottery,
Future result: I would go to Paris.

- Use conditional sentences to speculate about the past result of a condition that did not happen in the past. In this type of conditional sentence, the subordinate clause contains the past perfect tense of the verb, and the independent clause contains the modal *would have*, *could have*, or *might have*, plus the past participle.

Speculation: If I had won the lottery, I would have gone to Paris.

Untrue past condition: If I had won the lottery,
Untrue past result: I would have gone to Paris.

In this type of conditional sentence, you can express the conditional without using *if* by reversing the order of the subject and the verb in the subordinate clause.

Speculation: Had I won the lottery, I would have gone to Paris.

► Use conditional sentences to speculate about the future result of a condition that is not true in the present. In this type of conditional sentence, the subordinate clause contains the past-tense verb *were* (never *was*), and the independent clause contains the modal *would*, *could*, or *might*, plus the base form of the verb.

Speculation: If I were Prime Minister, I would do a great job.

Untrue condition: If I were Prime Minister
Future result: I would do a great job.

Speculation: If I were going to Paris, I would bring my passport.

Untrue condition: If I were going to Paris,
Future result: I would bring my passport

Practice Exercise

Complete each sentence below by giving the correct form of the verb in parentheses.¹

1. If the city _____ (expand) the parking lot space downtown, we would not have to park so far away from the movie theatre.
2. Whenever my roommate _____ (snore) loudly, I cannot sleep.
3. Children may be disappointed if they _____ (not receive) good grades.
4. If we _____ (not take) an exam on the conditional, we might not have learned it.
5. Maya _____ (not pass) her driving test unless she calms down.

¹ The above exercise and a portion of this handout has been adapted from “Unit Four”, Exercise Two, in Writing Clearly: An Editing Guide, ed. Jane Lane and Ellen Lange, Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1993, pp. 67-79. Other portions of this handout have been adapted from The Bedford Handbook, 5th ed. Diana Hacker, Boston: Bedford, 1998, pp. 395-397.

6. If it _____ (be) winter, all these trees would be covered in snow.
7. Had it not rained, the farmers _____(lose) all of their crops.
8. If the airplane had not had a mechanical problem, we probably _____ (arrive) in Winnipeg by now.
9. We _____(lie) on the beach in Mexico right now if we had been able to get our visas on time.
10. I _____ (try) to find more opportunities to write in English if I were you.

Answers

1. If the city expanded the parking lot space downtown, we would not have to park so far away from the movie theatre.
2. Whenever my roommate snores loudly, I cannot sleep.
3. Children may be disappointed if they do not receive good grades.
4. If we had not taken an exam on the conditional, we might not have learned it.
5. Maya will not pass her driving test unless she calms down.
6. If it were winter, all these trees would be covered in snow.
7. Had it not rained, the farmers would have lost all of their crops.
8. If the airplane had not had a mechanical problem, we probably would have arrived in Winnipeg by now.
9. We would be lying on the beach in Mexico right now if we had been able to get our visas on time.
10. I would try to find more opportunities to write in English if I were you.