3.08 "If" structures

"Conditionals" are also referred to as "*if* clauses", although if is not the only word used in such constructions (see below).

They are also often divided into four "types": "zero", "first", "second" and "third" conditionals: this can be useful distinction up to a point, but students should realise that there is more flexibility of use than these categories may suggest.

The construction is often used to indicate an **uncertain** event or situation.

Special tenses are usually used to show this uncertainty or "distance from reality".

The four main types of 'if' sentences in English:

1. The 'zero' conditional, where the tense in both parts of the sentence is the **simple present**:

'IF' CLAUSE **If + simple present** If you heat ice If it's hot	MAIN CLAUSE **simple present** it melts. shops sell more ice cream.

In these sentences, the time is **now or always** and the situation is **real and possible**. They are often used to refer to general truths.

2. The Type 1 conditional, where the tense in the '**if**' clause is the simple present, and the tense in the main clause is the **simple future/going to/present progressive** (referring to the future), a modal verb such as **may**, **might**, **could** or **should**, or an imperative.

'IF' CLAUSE **If + simple present** If it rains If you don't hurry **If + simple present** If you keep speaking French **If + simple present** If you don't feel better tomorrow If I get this work finished	MAIN CLAUSE **simple future** you will get wet. we will miss the train. **going to** I'm going to get angry. **modal verb** you should go and see the doctor. I might go to the pub.

In these sentences, the time in the "if" clause is the **present or future** (usually future) and in the main clause **future**, and the situation is **real**. They refer to a **possible condition** and its **probable result**.

Note that the present simple is used to refer to the future here.

3. [The Type 2 conditional](#), where the tense in the '**if**' clause is the **simple past**, and the verb in the main clause is **would/could/may/might/should + infinitive**:

'IF' CLAUSE **If + simple past**	MAIN CLAUSE **modal + infinitive**
If you paid more attention	you wouldn't make so many mistakes
If you went to bed earlier	you might not be so tired.
If I had more hair	I'd feel younger.

In these sentences, the time is **now or the future**, and the situation is **unreal**. They are **not** based on fact, but refer to an **unlikely or hypothetical condition** and its **probable result**.

4. [The Type 3 conditional](#), where the tense in the '**if**' clause is the **past perfect**, and the tense in the main clause is **would/could/may/might/should have + participle**:

'IF' CLAUSE **If + past perfect**	MAIN CLAUSE **Perfect conditional**
If it hadn't rained	England would have won.
If you had worked harder	you might have passed the exam.

In these sentences, the time is **past**, and the situation is **contrary to reality**. The facts are based on are the **opposite** of what is expressed, and they refer to an **unreal past condition** and its **probable past result**.

A further type of **'if'** sentence exists, where Type 2 and Type 3 are mixed. The tense in the '**if**' clause is the past perfect, and the tense in the main clause is **would/could/may/might/should + infinitive**

'IF' CLAUSE **If + past perfect**	MAIN CLAUSE **Present conditional**
If I had worked harder at school	I would have a better job now.
If we had looked at the map	we wouldn't be lost.

In these sentences, the time is **past** in the '**if**' clause, and **present** in the main clause. They refer to an **unreal past condition** and its **probable result** in the **present**.

In a bit more detail:

Talking about uncertain or imagined situations in the present or future

The choice of tense depends on the degree of possibility of the event, action or situation. This will often be a matter of personal interpretation. Look at the following:

> *If I **get** home in time, **I'm going to do** some gardening.*

> *If the Conservatives **win**, I'll **emigrate.***

In both cases, the speaker thinks that there is a fairly good chance of the "condition" happening (*getting home* and *winning*), so the present simple is used after *if* (even though it is referring to the future) and a future tense in the other part of the sentence. *May, might* or *could; should*; the present continuous (progressive), or an imperative could also be used in this second part:

> *Unless you **buy** another drink, I**'m going**.*

> *Taxes **migh**t rise if a new government **is elected**.*

> *If you **see** Basil, **give** him my regards.*

However, if the speaker thinks that the situation is improbable or impossible, different tenses are used:

> *If I **ruled** the world, every day **would be** the first day of spring.*

> *If I **were** you, I **wouldn't** bother.*

> *If I **retired** tomorrow, I **might** travel around the world.*

In the *if* clause, the simple past tense is used, even though the speaker is referring to the present (*If I were you*) or the future (*If I retired...*). This special use of the tense indicates the unreality of the situation.

Talking about unreal or imagined situations in the past

If you want to talk about something that didn't happen in the past, this is how you do it:

> *If I **had seen** you, I **would have said** hello.*

(In this case, I didn't see you, so I didn't say hello).

Notice that in standard English, there is no *would* in the *if* clause. (People around Birmingham, though, tend to say "If I'd've seen you ... "). Here are some more examples of the past conditional: note carefully the verb forms used:

> *If I**'d woken** up earlier, I **wouldn't have missed** the bus.*

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*If I **hadn't been working** there, I **wouldn't have met** her.*

*We **would have been able** to finish the testing if we **had had** more time.*

Note also that the part of the sentence after the *if* clause is often in the present:

*If I **hadn't eaten** that Balti last night, I **wouldn't be ill** now.*

Other notes on using conditionals

If is not the only word used in this type of sentence. Note these examples:

***Providing/provided** you work hard, you should be able to pass.*

*You can borrow my car **as/so long as** you're very careful with it.*

***Supposing** you lost your job, what do you think you would do?*

*You can have an extension **on condition that** you don't ask for any more.*

***Imagine** you won the competition. What would you do?*

In more formal English, if is sometimes omitted and the auxiliary verbs *were, had* and *should* placed before the subject:

***Had I** known earlier, I wouldn't have allowed it.*

***Should you** decide not to take the matter further, please inform us.*

***Were it** not for you invaluable assistance, the project would not be possible.*

Will and would are not usually found in the *if* clause. There are used, however, in polite requests, such as:

*If you **will** just wait a moment, the doctor will see you when she's free.*

Would is fairly commonly used after if when making polite/formal requests in letters:

*I would be most grateful if you **would** consider my application at your earliest convenience.*