

Conditionals

Conditional sentences usually have two parts, known as *clauses*. One of these is a result clause; the other is an *if* clause. The order of the clauses can usually be reversed.

e.g.

| | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| If I get a good result | I will be very happy. |
| [if clause] | [result clause] |
| I will be very happy | if I get a good result. |
| [result clause] | [if clause] |

The traditional types of conditional are called *zero*, *first*, *second* and *third*.

Zero: if + present + present. e.g. *If you **heat** water to 100°C it **boils**.*

First: if + present + future simple. e.g. *If I **get** a good result I **will be** very happy.*

Second: if + past simple + would + infinitive. e.g. *If I **got** a good result I **would be** very happy.*

Third: if + past perfect + modal + have + past participle. e.g. *If I **had got** a good result I **would have been** very happy.*

N.B. Time and tense are not the same. For instance, the present tense is used to refer to future time in a sentence such as "If it rains, I will go".

There are many more types of conditional constructions. The following chart is based on *The grammar book* by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, pp. 548, 552) and is used with their permission. You can also download it as a [pdf](#).

The chart breaks conditionals down into three main categories: factual, future and imaginative.

Factual conditionals can be timeless (outside time, expressing habits or scientific facts) or time-bound (referring to present, past or different times).

Future conditionals can express a strong or weak condition or result (something will happen or may happen) or be used to give advice or commands.

Imaginative conditionals can be hypothetical (unlikely but possible in the present or future) or counterfactual (impossible, referring to present or past time).

| Factual | | | | Future (predictive) | | Imaginative | | |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| Timeless | | Time-bound | | | | Hypothetical (unlikely but possible) | Counterfactual (impossible) | |
| Generic | Habitual | | | Strong condition or result | Weakened condition or result | | | |
| Outside time | Present or past time | All times | Past time | Future time | Present or future time | Present or future time | Present time | Past time |
| Present tense | Present or past tense; or <i>would</i> + infinitive | Same or different tenses or modals | Past tense + modal + <i>have</i> + past participle | Present + future tenses; or present + imperative | Present time + other modal + infinitive | Past tense + modal + infinitive; or <i>were to</i> + infinitive + modal + infinitive | Past tense + modal + infinitive | Past perfect tense + modal + <i>have</i> + past participle |
| e.g. <i>If you heat water to 100C, it boils.</i> | e.g. <i>If I estimate the results first, it always helps.</i> <i>If we misinterpreted the results, we indicated this immediately.</i> | e.g. <i>If you create a spreadsheet, you can formulate the results more easily.</i> <i>If you legislate for X, it could occur.</i> <i>If you researched the area, you must have realised the problem before we did.</i> | e.g. <i>If they financed the project, they may have distributed the product too.</i> | e.g. <i>If you analyse the results, you will define the problem more clearly.</i> <i>If you proceed with the experiment, interpret the findings carefully.</i> | e.g. <i>If you assess the data thoroughly, you might establish the cause of the problem.</i> <i>If you benefit from the study, you should identify the key factors in its success.</i> | e.g. <i>If you exported the table, it would require too much data.</i> <i>If I were to process all this data, I would structure the resulting graph very carefully.</i> | e.g. <i>If Einstein were alive today, he would probably solve the problem.</i> | e.g. <i>If you had contextualised the argument it would have been more useful.</i> |
| Scientific facts | Habits | Implications | Inferences | Predictions. Commands | Possible plans. Advice | Future possibilities | ... but he isn't alive today. | ... but you didn't contextualise it. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |

You can use conditionals to:

- State scientific facts in the present tense:

If you heat water to 100C, it boils.

- Show habitual actions in the present or past:

If I estimate the results first, it always helps.

If we misinterpreted the results, we indicated this immediately.

- Show implications:

If you create a spreadsheet, you can formulate the results more easily.

If you legislate for X, it could occur.

If you researched the area, you must have realised the problem before we did.

- Make inferences about the past:

If they financed the project, they may have distributed the product too.

- Make predictions about the future:

If you analyse the results, you will define the problem more clearly.

- Give commands:

If you proceed with the experiment, interpret the findings carefully.

- Show possible plans or actions:

If you assess the data thoroughly, you might establish the cause of the problem.

- Give advice:

If you benefit from the study, you should identify the key factors in its success.

- Show future possibilities:

If you exported the table, it would require too much data.

If I were to process all this data, I would structure the resulting graph very carefully.

- Refer to impossible situations in the present:

If Einstein were alive today, he would probably solve the problem.

- Refer to impossible situations in the past:

If you had contextualised the argument it would have been more useful.

You can also use conditionals to:

- Speak humourously. e.g. *If that's the best Gordon Chan can do, I'm glad he doesn't cook for me!*
- Speak sarcastically. eg *As if she knew!*

Other words that sometimes introduce conditionality

These words do not always introduce a conditional sentence. It is important to look at the context of the whole sentence in order to decide whether or not it is conditional. You should also note the word order and punctuation of the examples, and see whether the parts of the phrases can be separated.

As long as

As long as you submit the essay on time, I'll mark it quickly.
= *I'll mark the essay quickly **if** you submit it on time.*

*They would like to help with the group assignment, **as long as** the rest of the group are happy to include them.*
= *They would like to help with the group assignment **if** the rest of the group are happy to include them.*

Even though (But . . . still . . .)

***Even though** you haven't finished gathering data, she will write a draft report,*
= *You haven't finished gathering data, **but** she will **still** write a draft report.*

N.B. When you use *even though*, you should not put *but* as well. If you use *but*, put it in the same clause as *still*. You can separate the words *but* and *still*, as in the following example:

| | |
|---|---|
| <u>She will still write a draft report,</u> | even though you haven't finished gathering data. |
| You haven't finished gathering data, | but she will still write a draft report. |

Only if

*It's **only if** the book doesn't arrive in time that you should talk to the librarian.*
*They decided not to publish the results before 2016, and then **only if** the results were conclusive.*

N.B. If you start a sentence with *only if*, you need to reverse the subject and verb in the second clause:

***Only if** the book is late **should you** talk to the librarian.*

This example is not a question; it has the subject (*you*) and verb (*should*) reversed because the sentence starts with *Only if*.

Otherwise (If . . . not . . .)

I should sharpen all my pencils, otherwise I will be unable to start writing.

= *If I do not sharpen all my pencils, I will be unable to start writing.*

The grant amount was small, otherwise all areas of the research would have been covered.

= *If the grant amount had not been small, all areas of the research would have been covered.*

Provided (that) (interchangeable with providing that)

***Provided** the video is ready on time, it will be uploaded to the website.*

= *Provided that the video is ready on time, it will be uploaded to the website.* = *If the video is ready on time, it will be uploaded to the website.*

*We will complete the exercise tomorrow, **provided that** the computer code is available.*

= *We will complete the exercise tomorrow, **provided** the computer code is available.*

= *We will complete the exercise tomorrow **if** the computer code is available.*

Providing (that) (interchangeable with *Provided that*)

They will go to the conference providing that they receive enough funding.

= *They will go to the conference, providing they receive enough funding.*

= *They will go to the conference if they receive enough funding.*

(Even) Supposing (that)

***Even supposing that** I wished to apply for the job, I could not.*

= ***Even if** I wished to apply for the job, I could not.*

***Supposing** you were to redo the experiment, would you expect to find similar results?*

= ***If** you were to redo the experiment, would you expect to find similar results?*

Unless (= If . . . not . . .)

*Your writing will be boring **unless** you vary your vocabulary more.*

= *Your writing will be boring **if you do not** vary your vocabulary more.*

*People will not believe you have been to Australia **unless** they see a photo of you standing next to the Sydney Opera House.*

= *People will not believe you have been to Australia **if** they do not see a photo of you standing next to the Sydney Opera House.*

When

Students should access the Internet through the library website when they want to use the "Oxford English Dictionary" free of charge.

= Students should access the Internet through the library website **if** they want to use the "Oxford English Dictionary" free of charge.

Whenever (Always . . . if . . .)

*She avoided those lectures **whenever** she could.*
= *She **always** avoided those lectures **if** she could.*

Whether or not ((Even) if . . . (not) . . .)

*The lecturer will not remark your exam, **whether or not** you failed.*
= *The lecturer will not remark your exam, **even if** you failed.*
= *The lecturer will not remark your exam, **even if** you did not pass.*

The information on this page is very largely based on Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book* (2nd ed). US: Heinle & Heinle. We highly recommend that book, and the new edition out soon, for anyone who wants a more detailed explanation of English grammar.

Conditionals in the movie 'If You Love Me'

If you heat water to 100C it boils. (factual, timeless, scientific fact - 1)

If you see the right girl, you know. (factual, timeless, scientific fact - 1)

Even if I had homework, I still helped them with their fish farm. (factual, timeless, habit - 2)

If you walk on snow, you cannot hide your footprints. (factual, timeless, habit - 2)

If I can look after a fish, I can look after a girl! (factual, timebound, all times - 3)

I like you, **even though** you studied maths and I studied history. (factual, timebound, all times - 3)

Whenever I see someone in trouble, I like to help them. (present + present, factual, timeless, generic - 3)

If you were there, you might have seen me. (factual, time-bound, past time, inferences - 4)

If you always give, you will always have. (future, strong result, future time, prediction - 5)

I want to find a girlfriend, **otherwise** I will be lonely. (future, strong result, future, prediction - 5)

If you like this man, please vote. (future, strong result, future, command - 5)

I think you should always stop and help someone, **unless** they are too dangerous. (future, weakened condition, advice - 6)

Provided that we are both honest with each other and communicate well, I think we could be very happy. (future, weakened condition - 6)

What would you do **if** you found your ideal girl? (imaginative, hypothetical, future, future dream - 7)

If my mother were here, she would say you are a nice boy! (imaginative, counterfactual, present, impossible - 8)

If you had had more money when you were younger, would you have bought a fast car? (imaginative, counterfactual, past time - 9)

If I had had more money, I would have given it to my parents. (imaginative, counterfactual, past time - 9)

References

Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book* (2nd ed). US: Heinle & Heinle. pp. 548, 552

Swan, M. (1980). *Practical English usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (I used this older edition, but there are much newer editions.)