

MPC English & Study Skills Center

Conditionals

Conditionals are "if" or "unless" sentences; that is, they contain one or more dependent clauses starting with **if** or **unless**. They suggest that one action must occur before a second one. There are **five basic types** of conditionals.

Note: "Unless" means "if. . . not.")

Habitual Actions

If . . . present tense . . . , (then) . . . present tense . . .

This conditional structure is used to show that every time one action occurs, the second one follows. If used with negatives, it means that if one action does not happen, the other action also does not happen.

If I drink too much coffee, (then) I get a headache. (*Every time*)

If he lies to his mother, he gets punished. (*Every time*)

Unless he has his bottle, he doesn't fall asleep.

If he doesn't have his bottle, he doesn't fall asleep. (*Never happens*)

Possible Present/Future Actions

If . . . present tense . . . , (then) . . . future . . .

This conditional structure is used to show that after one action occurs (now or in the future), another action is possible; both actions are possible. Note the construction that suggests a future time can be used: *will, might, can, be going to*.

If I save money for the next two months, I will take a trip.
(*I might save money, so I might take a trip.*)

If I study hard, I can pass the test. (*I might study, so I might pass the test.*)

If she lies to me again, I am going to leave her. (*It is possible she will lie, so it is possible that I will leave.*)

Unless I work harder, I won't get a raise.

If I don't work harder, I won't get a raise. (*I might not work harder, so I might not get a raise.*)

Impossible Present/Future Actions—Contrary to Fact

If . . . past tense . . . (then) . . . could/would

This conditional structure is used to imagine an action that is contrary to fact, or opposite of what is true, and will not happen. **Note:** Even though the past tense is used, this form does not refer to past events.

If I studied harder, I could get a good grade. (*I do not intend to study.*)

If she waited, she would take the bus. (*She will not wait.*)

If she cared about me, she would help me. (*She does not care.*)

Impossible Present/Future Situations—Contrary to Fact

If . . . WERE . . . (then) . . . could/would

This conditional structure is also used to imagine a situation that is contrary to fact and will not happen, but it uses the verb **be** in the "if" clause in the subjunctive form of "were," regardless of the subject (with both singular and plural subjects).

If I were you, I would study harder. (*I am obviously not you.*)

If he were a dog, he would dig for bones. (*He is not a dog.*)

If they were rich, they could buy a big house. (*They are not rich.*)

If you were sure of your position, then you would be happier. (*You are not sure.*)

Impossible Past Actions

If . . . past perfect . . . (then) . . . could/would have + past participle

This conditional structure is used to imagine that past actions or situations were different than they actually were.

If I had studied, then I would have gotten a good grade. (*Too late. I did not study.*)

If they had stopped drinking, they wouldn't have crashed the car. (*They did not stop drinking, so they crashed.*)

If we had brought the camera, we could have taken a picture of Clay Aiken. (*We did not, so we could not.*)

Note: See *also* the related handouts on **Verbs/Verb Tenses** and **Modals**.