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).

#	Group	Subgroup	Category	Time	Verb structure	Example	Function
1	Factual	Timeless	Generic	Outside time	Present tense	*e.g. If you heat water to 100C, it boils.*	Scientific facts
2	Factual	Timeless	Habitual	Present or past time	Present or past tense; or *would* + infinitive	*e.g. If I estimate the results first, it always helps. If we misinterpreted the results, we indicated this immediately.*	Habits
3	Factual	Time-bound	All times		Same or different tenses or modals	*e.g. 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.*	Implications
4	Factual	Time-bound	Past time	Past time	Past tense + modal + *have* + past participle	*e.g. If they financed the project, they may have distributed the product too.*	Inferences
5	Future (predictive)		Strong condition or result	Future time	Present + future tenses; or present + imperative	*e.g. If you analyse the results, you will define the problem more clearly. If you proceed with the experiment, interpret the findings carefully.*	Predictions. Commands
6	Future (predictive)		Weakened condition or result	Present or future time	Present time + other modal + infinitive	*e.g. If you assess the data thoroughly, you might establish the cause of the problem. If you benefit from the study, you should identify the key factors in its success.*	Possible plans. Advice
7	Imaginative	Hypothetical (unlikely but possible)		Present or future time	Past tense + modal + infinitive; or *were to* + infinitive + modal + infinitive	*e.g. 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.*	Future possibilities
8	Imaginative	Counterfactual (impossible)	Present time	Present time	Past tense + modal + infinitive	*e.g. If Einstein were alive today, he would probably solve the problem.*	. . . but he isn't alive today.
9	Imaginative	Counterfactual (impossible)	Past time	Past time	Past perfect tense + modal + *have* + past participle	*e.g. If you had contextualised the argument it would have been more useful.*	. . . but you didn't contextualise it.

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:

She will still write a draft report,	**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.