

The 'Big If' Using Conditionals – Lesson, FAQs, & Quiz

The conditional mood in English is used to discuss possibilities, hypothetical situations, and consequences. It often involves the words “if” and “would,” but can also include other modal verbs such as “could” or “should.” Mastering the conditional can significantly enhance your ability to communicate complex thoughts and scenarios in English. In this section, we’ll explore how to use the conditional in various contexts, helping you to become more proficient and confident in your English language skills.

We use the conditional to show a possible situation based on another situation. For example:

If A happens, then B will happen.

The first conditional shows that something could possibly happen. Its structure is like this:

If + *subject* + *present tense (or present progressive)* —, *subject* + **will/may/can** + *base verb* —.

For example:

If it rains tomorrow, I will take my umbrella.

If you help me, we can finish earlier.

If the boys give the monkey a coin, it may dance for them.

Notice that each sentence above uses the present tense on the **if** side. But we could also use the present progressive if something is happening right now.

If he isn’t working right now, he may want to come over for dinner.

We can also change the order of the sentence and put the **if** side on the second half. The only difference is that there is no comma.

I will take my umbrella if it rains tomorrow.

We can finish earlier if you help me.

The monkey may dance for the boys if they give it a coin.

He may want to come over for dinner if he isn’t working right now.

Practice Quiz – Using the Conditional

Test your understanding of the conditional mood with these five questions. Each question will challenge your ability to construct or interpret conditional sentences correctly. After completing the quiz, review your answers to consolidate your knowledge and address any areas of uncertainty.

Question 1: Choose the correct form to complete the sentence:

“If she ___ (to be) free tomorrow, she will join us for dinner.”

- a) is
- b) was
- c) were

Question 2: Fill in the blanks to complete the second conditional sentence:

“If I ___ (have) a car, I ___ (drive) to work every day.”

- a) have, will drive
- b) had, would drive
- c) has, drives

Question 3: Which sentence is an example of the third conditional?

- a) “If it rains, we will stay indoors.”
- b) “If it had rained, we would have stayed indoors.”
- c) “If it rains, we would stay indoors.”

Question 4: Identify the type of conditional used in this sentence:

“If you heat ice, it melts.”

- a) Zero conditional
- b) First conditional
- c) Second conditional

Question 5: Complete the sentence using the correct form of the verb in brackets for a first conditional sentence:

“If they ___ (to arrive) late, we will start without them.”

- a) arrive
- b) arrived
- c) will arrive

Answer Key

Answer 1: a) is

Answer 2: b) had, would drive

Answer 3: b) “If it had rained, we would have stayed indoors.”

Answer 4: a) Zero conditional

Answer 5: a) arrive

Frequently Asked Questions about Using the Conditional

What are the types of conditional sentences?

There are four main types of conditional sentences in English: zero (general truths), first (possible or likely situations), second (hypothetical, less probable situations), and third (hypothetical situations in the past).

How do I use the first conditional?

The first conditional is used for possible or likely future events. The structure typically involves “if” followed by the present simple tense, and the main clause with “will” or another modal verb.

Example: “If it rains, we will cancel the picnic.”

What is the difference between the second and third conditionals?

The second conditional is used for unlikely or hypothetical situations in the present or future, using the past simple tense after “if” and “would” in the main clause. The third conditional refers to hypothetical situations in the past, using the past perfect tense after “if” and “would have” in the main clause.

Can I use ‘were’ for all subjects in the second conditional?

Yes, traditionally, “were” is used for all subjects in the second conditional to emphasize the hypothetical nature of the situation. For example: “If I were you, I would take the job.”

How do modal verbs like ‘could’ and ‘should’ fit into conditional sentences?

Modal verbs can be used in conditional sentences to express varying degrees of certainty, permission, or recommendation. In the second conditional, “could” suggests possibility, while “should” suggests a recommendation. Example: “If you asked her, she could help you.”