

A conditional sentence describes the condition that is necessary for a particular outcome to occur. The conjunctions *if*, *even if*, *when*, *whenever*, *whether*, and *unless* often appear in conditional sentences. The meaning of a conditional sentence determines which verb tenses need to be used in the independent and subordinate clauses.

## A conditional sentence is used

- To express a general or habitual fact.

In this case the verb tense is the same in both clauses.

- General fact: When I touch an ice cube, it feels cold.
- Habitual fact: Whenever I touched an ice cube, it felt cold.

- To make predictions about the future or to express future intentions or possibilities.

In this case, the verb in the subordinate clause is at the present tense, and the verb in the independent clause has the modal *can*, *may*, *might*, *should* or *will* that is used with the main verb.

- Prediction: If I win the lottery, I can go to Paris.
- Intention: If I win the lottery, I will go to Paris.
- Possibility: If I win the lottery, I might go to Paris.

- To speculate about the future result of a possible, yet unlikely, present condition.

In this case, the verb in the subordinate clause is at the past tense, and the verb in the independent clause has the modal *would*, *could*, or *might* that is used with the main verb.

- Speculation: If I won the lottery, I would go to Paris.

- To speculate about the past result of a condition that did not happen in the past.

In this case, the verb in the subordinate clause is at the past perfect tense, and the verb in the independent clause has the modal *would have*, *could have*, or *might have* that is used with the past participle of the main verb.

- Speculation: If I had won the lottery, I would have gone to Paris.

It is also possible to express the conditional without using the word *if* by simply reversing the order of the subject and the verb in the subordinate clause.

- Speculation: Had I won the lottery, I would have gone to Paris.

- To speculate about the future result of a condition that is not true in the present.

In this case, the past-tense verb *were* is used in the subordinate clause, and the verb in the independent clause has the modal *would*, *could*, or *might* that is used with the main verb.

- Speculation: If I were Prime Minister, I would do a great job.
- Speculation: If I were going to Paris, I would bring my passport.

## Practice Exercises:

Complete each sentence below by giving the correct form of the verb in parentheses.

1. If the city \_\_\_\_\_ (expand) the parking lot space downtown, we would not have to park so far away from the movie theatre.
2. Whenever my roommate \_\_\_\_\_ (snore) loudly, I cannot sleep.
3. Students may be disappointed if they \_\_\_\_\_ (not receive) good grades.
4. If we \_\_\_\_\_ (not take) an exam on the conditional, we might not have learned it.
5. Maya \_\_\_\_\_ (not pass) her driving test unless she calms down.
6. If it \_\_\_\_\_ (be) winter, all these trees would be covered in snow.
7. Had it not rained, the farmers \_\_\_\_\_ (lose) all of their crops.
8. If the airplane had not had a mechanical problem, we probably \_\_\_\_\_ (arrive) in Winnipeg by now.
9. We \_\_\_\_\_ (lie) on the beach in Mexico right now if we had been able to get our visas on time.
10. I \_\_\_\_\_ (try) to find more opportunities to write in English if I were you.

## Answers:

1. If the city had expanded the parking lot space downtown, we would not have to park so far away from the movie theatre.
2. Whenever my roommate snores loudly, I cannot sleep.
3. Children may be disappointed if they do not receive good grades.
4. If we had not taken an exam on the conditional, we might not have learned it.
5. Maya will not pass her driving test unless she calms down.
6. If it were winter, all these trees would be covered in snow.
7. Had it not rained, the farmers would have lost all of their crops.
8. If the airplane had not had a mechanical problem, we probably would have arrived in Winnipeg by now.
9. We would be lying on the beach in Mexico right now, if we had been able to get our visas on time.
10. I would try to find more opportunities to write in English if I were you.

Note: This handout was based on © Effective Writing Program, University of Western Ontario.