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Conditionals

The Garden of What If





Grammar at a glance

When you want to...	Form to use	Worked example
State a recurring rule	if + present, present	If the gate sticks, we oil it.
Plan for an open possibility	if + present, will + base	If it sticks tomorrow, we will oil it.
Name the exception	unless + condition	We will open the gate unless it jams.
Imagine a different present	if + past, would + base	If I had the key, I would open it.
Imagine a different past	if + had + participle, would have + participle	If I had seen the sign, I would have stopped.
Link a past choice to now	if + past perfect, would + base	If I had kept the key, I would have it now.

SELECT A ROW TO OPEN ITS LESSON

CONDITIONALS

Conditions, results and recurring rules



Every morning Lily checks the soil. The crew's routine says: if the soil is dry, Lily waters the plant. Today's check is still pending. Yesterday's log separately confirms that the soil was dry and Lily watered because of that.

If introduces a condition. The other clause gives the result when that condition holds. A general rule can use present forms in both.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
A recurring rule	If the soil is dry, Lily waters the plant.	The present forms describe the crew's routine. This does not announce that today's soil is dry.
Condition not met	Today's check might show wet soil.	The dry-soil rule would not tell us what Lily does in that case. A different instruction may apply.
A recorded cause	Because the soil was dry yesterday, Lily watered it.	This reports a confirmed reason and event. It is not just an untested condition.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Condition	Routine result	Unknown today
if the soil is dry	Lily waters it	whether the soil is dry

Does "if dry, then water" mean watering happens only when the soil is dry?

Not by itself. A one-way rule does not state its converse. If the policy really restricts watering to dry soil, it needs an explicit only-if restriction.

YOUR TURN

Which states a recurring rule?

The desk was busy yesterday. / If the desk is busy, we wait.

> Answer • If the desk is busy, we wait.
> The if sentence connects a recurring condition with its result.

CONDITIONALS

Open future conditions, promises and uncertain results



Sam has not confirmed tomorrow's visit. Lily promises that if he comes, she will ask him to help carry the box. A separate weather plan says rain might delay the delivery. Nothing in the current record guarantees Sam's visit or a dry day.

For an open future possibility, a common pattern is if plus present simple, followed by will and a base verb.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
An open plan	If Sam comes tomorrow, Lily will ask him to help.	Comes is present in form but refers to tomorrow's open condition. Will ask gives the planned result.
A possible result	If it rains, the delivery might be late.	Might leaves the result uncertain even when the condition is met. Different result modals change the message.
An expected event	When Sam arrives, Lily will greet him.	When presents arrival as expected in this version. Use if when you want to leave whether he comes open.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Open future condition	Promised result	Possible result in another plan
if Sam comes tomorrow	Lily will ask him	the delivery might be late

Must every conditional have will, and must every present form mean now?

No. The result can be a possibility or instruction, while present forms in ordinary future if clauses can refer to tomorrow. Choose the form from the clause's job and the intended time reference.

YOUR TURN

Choose the ordinary future-condition pattern.

If Noor calls tomorrow, I will answer. / If Noor will calls tomorrow, I answer.

> Answer • If Noor calls tomorrow, I will answer.
> Calls has future reference in this if clause.

CONDITIONALS

Unless, only if and the direction of a condition

The repair lane has two requirements: wear a helmet and wait for the supervisor to open the gate. A helmet is necessary, but a helmet alone does not grant entry. The sign says: do not enter unless you have a helmet. A second sign reminds visitors to wait for the supervisor.

Unless often means if not. Check which event prevents the result before rewriting the condition.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
If not	If you do not have a helmet, do not enter.	No helmet blocks entry. This sentence does not promise entry to everyone who has a helmet.
Unless	Do not enter unless you have a helmet.	Unless expresses the same no-helmet restriction in this simple rule. It does not remove the supervisor requirement.
Only if	You may enter only if you have a helmet.	A helmet is necessary. Read the full policy: the gate must also be opened by the supervisor.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

No-helmet restriction
if you do not have a helmet, do not enter

Equivalent simple restriction
do not enter unless you have a helmet

Necessary, not enough alone
entry only if you have a helmet

Does meeting one necessary condition automatically give the result?

No. A ticket may be necessary for a show without being enough when the show is cancelled. Here a helmet is necessary, but the supervisor must also open the gate.

YOUR TURN

“Unless it rains, we will play” matches which simple condition?

If it rains, we will play. / If it does not rain, we will play.

> Answer • If it does not rain, we will play.
> Unless supplies the if-not meaning here.

CONDITIONALS

Imagined present and future situations



Lily has no extra helper today and cannot move the heavy display safely alone. She imagines what she would do with help. A separate future question asks what she would do if Sam visited next month; the speaker presents that visit as a remote possibility, without assigning it a numerical probability.

If plus a past form can describe an imagined situation now or in the future. Would introduces the imagined result.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Imagine a different now	If Lily had an extra helper, she would move the display.	Had is past in form, but the imagined situation is today. The record says she does not have that helper.
Imagine a remote future	If Sam visited next month, Lily would ask him to help.	Visited has a future reference here. The speaker treats the visit as more remote than an open if-he-visits plan.
Give advice	If I were Lily, I would wait for help.	Were is a standard hypothetical form, including with I or she. This imagines the adviser in Lily's position.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Reality today	Imagined condition today	Imagined result
Lily has no extra helper	if Lily had a helper	she would move the display

Must a past-form if clause report a past event?

No. If I had help today imagines a different present. If Sam visited next month presents a remote future. Recover time and reality status before choosing or interpreting the form.

YOUR TURN

Choose an imagined present alternative to "I have no key".

If I had a key, I would open the door. / I had a key yesterday.

> Answer • If I had a key, I would open the door.
> The if sentence imagines a different present.

CONDITIONALS

Alternative pasts, past perfect and modal perfect results



Yesterday at 8:50 Sam did not secure the pot. At 8:55 it tipped and soil spilled. For this review, the equipment record confirms that securing the fitted support would have kept this pot upright in those conditions. At noon the crew imagines that different past choice; they cannot change the actual log.

To imagine a different past, use if plus had and a past participle. Would have plus a past participle gives an imagined past result.

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
The actual record	Sam did not secure the pot, and soil spilled.	This reports what actually happened. It is the evidence against which the imagined alternative is compared.
An alternative past	If Sam had secured the pot, it would not have tipped.	Had secured imagines a different past condition. Would not have tipped gives the supported alternative past result.
A cautious alternative	With a less certain equipment record, it might not have tipped.	Might leaves the imagined outcome uncertain. Grammar alone cannot prove that a different choice guarantees a result.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Alternative past condition	Alternative past result	Actual past
if Sam had secured the pot	it would not have tipped	it was unsecured and tipped

Does an imagined outcome become a fact because the sentence uses would have?

No. It describes an imagined past. Use might have when you are unsure the different choice would have changed the result.

YOUR TURN

Choose the past-perfect condition.

if she had went / if she had gone

> Answer • if she had gone
> Gone is the participle.

CONDITIONALS

Mixed time references and the final planning report

Noor did not charge the radio last night, and it has no power now. The equipment record confirms that an overnight charge would leave it ready now. In a separate scenario, Sam does not know the gate code and did not know it yesterday, so he could not open the gate then.

A past condition can have a present result. Read both time clues, as in “If I had slept well, I would feel alert now.”

USE	EXAMPLE	WHAT TO NOTICE
Past choice to present result	If Noor had charged the radio last night, it would be ready now.	Had charged locates the alternative condition in the past. Would be locates the imagined result now.
Continuing state to past opportunity	If Sam knew the code, he could have opened the gate yesterday.	Knew imagines a different continuing state. Could have opened describes an opportunity in the past.
Keep both clauses in the past	If Noor had charged it before the test, it would have worked at yesterday’s test.	This different hypothetical report places both condition and result in the past. It does not answer the question about readiness now.

HOW THE PATTERN WORKS

Past condition to present result	Continuing state to past opportunity	Both clauses past
had charged to would be ready now	knew to could have opened yesterday	had charged to would have worked then

Should every if sentence fit one unchanged numbered formula?

No. The common types are useful descriptions, but mixed conditionals combine time references. Meaning comes first: locate each clause, check the scenario’s reality status, and then build the verbs.

YOUR TURN

Past condition with a present result: choose the matching sentence.

If I had charged it last night, it would be ready now. / If I charge it tomorrow, it will be ready then.

> Answer • If I had charged it last night, it would be ready now.
> The references cross past to present.

ONE LAST CHALLENGE

Yesterday's decision, today's result

You left your raincoat at home yesterday. You need it here now. Imagine a different past decision and its present result.



A POSSIBLE ANSWER

If I had brought my raincoat yesterday, I would have it here now.

Had brought changes an imagined past choice. Would have it describes possession now.

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