Conditionals

Adapted from "First Certificate Language Practice" by Michael Vince

Explanations

Real/likely situations: first conditional

- **With *if***

A first conditional describes a real or likely situation. A present tense is used after *if,* but the time referred to is the future. *Will/Won't* are common in the result clause.

> If you *fall, I won't be able to* catch you!

This means that there is a real possibility this will happen.
Going to can be used instead of **will**.

> If it rains, we're *going to* get wet.

The modal verb *can* is also common in first conditional sentences.
*If the cases **are** too heavy, I **can** help you carry them.*

- ***Unless, provided, as long as***

Unless means *If... not.*
Unless you leave at once, **I'll call** the police.
If you **don't leave** at once, **I'll call** the police.
Provided and *as long as* can also introduce a condition.
Provided *you leave now, you'll catch the train.*

- **With the imperative**

It is common to use the imperative instead of *if.*
Get *me some cigarettes, and I'll **pay** you later.*

- **With *should***

We can use *should* instead of if in a conditional sentence. It means *if by any chance ...* and makes the action less likely.
Should *you see John, can you give him a message?*

Unreal/imaginary situations: second conditional

- **With *if***

A second conditional describes an unreal or imaginary situation.
A past simple tense is used after *if,* but the time referred to is the future. *Would* is common in the result clause.

> If you *fell**, you **would hurt** yourself.*

This means that there is a small possibility that this will happen. The situation and its result are imagined.
The modal verbs *might* and *could* are common in second conditional sentences.

> If you **became** a millionaire, you **might be** unhappy.

- ***Were***

Were is often used instead of *was* in formal language. Note that *were* is not stressed in speech.

*If I **were** taller, **I'd join** the basketball team.*

*If I **were** you, **I'd leave** now. (**I** and **you** are stressed in speech)*

• ***Were to***

Were to is another way of expressing a second conditional sentence.

*If they **were to offer** me the job, **I'd turn** it down.*

Unreal/imaginary past situations: third conditional

• **With *if***

A third conditional describes an unreal or imaginary situation in the past. A past perfect tense is used after *if*. *Would + have +* past participle is used in the result clause.

*If John **had studied** more, he **would have got** better marks.*

This means that John didn't study more. A past situation, different to the one that really happened, is imagined.

The modal verbs *might* and *could* are common in this kind of sentence.

*If you **had tried** harder, you **might have succeeded**.*

• **Mixed conditions**

For past events which have a result continuing in the present, it is possible to use the form of a third conditional in the if-clause, and the form of a second conditional in the result clause.

*If you **had saved** some money, you **wouldn't be** so hard up.*

Other *if* sentences

If can mean *when* in the sense of *whenever*.

***If/When/Whenever** it **rains**, **we play** football indoors instead.*

In this type of sentence we use the present simple in both the if-clause and the result clause.

If can also mean *if it is true that*.

*If (it is true that) you **have** a job like that, you **are** very lucky.*

*If (it is true that) nothing **happened**, you **were** lucky.*

If+ past simple can be used for past events with a real possibility, or that we know are true. This type of sentence does not have any special grammar rules.

***If** you **missed** the TV programme last night, you can borrow my recording.*

***If** the police **arrested** him, they must suspect him.*

1 The present tense form in first conditional sentences does not refer to present time. It refers to future time.

2 The past tense form in second conditional sentences does not refer to past time. It refers to future time.

3 The difference between first and second conditional sentences can depend on the attitude of the speaker. The future situation might have a high possibility of happening (first conditional) or a low possibility (second conditional).

> *If she falls, she'll land in the safety net.* (This means that there is a real possibility that she will fall.)

> *If she fell she would land in the safety net.* (I am commenting on an imaginary situation, and I do not think she is likely to fall.)

4 *Might* and *could* are common in conditional sentences when we are uncertain about our predictions.

> *If you leave now, you **might** catch the train.*
> *If you asked him nicely, he **might** agree.*
> *If you'd continued driving in that way, you **could** have **hit** another car.*

5 Mixed conditional forms are possible, especially where a past event has a present result.

> *If Brenda **hadn't stolen** the money, she **wouldn't be** in prison.*

6 *Unless, provided,* and *as long as* can introduce conditions.