Unreal Conditionals

Unreal conditionals, also known as **the second** and **third conditionals**, are used in English to discuss hypothetical or imaginary situations and their consequences. They help us to explore outcomes that are contrary to fact, either in the present or the past.

Second Conditional (Present Unreal Conditional)

The second conditional refers to present or future situations that are imaginary, unlikely, or impossible. It is used to express hypothetical situations and their potential outcomes.

Structure:

If-clause: If + past simple verb, Main clause: would + base verb

Examples:

- If I won the lottery, I would travel around the world. (I haven't won the lottery, but I'm imagining the possibility.)
- If she were the president, she would implement new policies. (She is not the president, but we're discussing a hypothetical scenario.)

In the if-clause, "were" is often used for all subjects in a more formal style, particularly with the verb "to be," to express the hypothetical nature (e.g., If I were you, not If I was you).

Third Conditional (Past Unreal Conditional)

The third conditional is used to talk about past situations that did not happen and their imaginary results. It is a way to reflect on how different actions or conditions could have led to different outcomes in the past.

Structure:

If-clause: If + past perfect verb (had + past participle), Main clause: would have + past participle verb

Examples:

- If I had studied harder, I would have passed the exam. (I didn't study harder and I didn't pass the exam.)
- If they had left earlier, they would have avoided the traffic. (They didn't leave earlier and didn't avoid the traffic.)

Mixed Conditionals

Mixed conditionals combine time references; the if-clause refers to the past, and the main clause to the present or vice versa. They are used to express the present result of a past condition or the past result of a present condition.

Examples:

- If you had practiced more (past condition), you would be a better player now (present result).
- If he were more attentive (present condition), he wouldn't have missed the meeting yesterday (past result).

Key Points

- Unreal conditionals allow us to speculate about what could happen, what might have happened, and what we wish would happen in hypothetical situations.
- The verb tenses used in the clauses are crucial to clearly indicate the time reference and the unreal nature of the situation.
- It's important to note that in these conditionals, the situations are imaginary or hypothetical and not based on actual facts or events.

Unreal Conditionals Exercise 1:

Choose the correct answer.

1. If I _____ a bird, I would fly around the world.
a) am
b) were
c) had been

2. If she _____ the train, she would have arrived on time.
a) caught
b) had caught
c) would catch

3. If we _____ enough money, we would buy a new car.
a) had
b) have
c) would have

4. She would have felt better if she _____ the medicine.
a) takes
b) took
c) had taken

5. He could be a professional athlete now if he _____ more as a child.
a) practiced
b) had practiced
c) would have practiced

6. If I _____ the boss, I would make some big changes.
a) am
b) had been
c) were

7. _____ earlier, we wouldn't have missed the flight.
a) If we leave
b) If we left
c) Had we left

8. If I _____ (to understand) the problem, I could help you solve it.
a) understand
b) understood
c) had understood

9. They _____ better off now if they had saved more money in the past.
a) are
b) would be
c) would have been

10. We could be enjoying the holiday if we _____ the tickets.
a) book
b) booked
c) had booked

Unreal Conditionals Exercise 2:

Complete the gaps with the correct unreal conditional form

1. If I _____ **(to have)** more time, I would learn to play the piano.

2. If he _____ **(to be)** more careful, he wouldn't have broken the glass.

3. You could improve your Spanish if you _____ **(to live)** in Spain for a year.

4. She _____ **(to buy)** the dress if it had been cheaper.

5. You _____ **(to enjoy)** the trip more if you liked nature.

6. They _____ **(to win)** the match if they had played better.

7. They would have stayed longer if they _____ **(to not have)** another appointment.

8. She would get the job if she _____ **(to have)** more experience.

9. You would understand the reference if you _____ **(to read)** the book.

10. If you _____ **(to need)** help, you would ask for it.



Unreal conditionals: answer key

Grammar practice · B2 Upper-intermediate

Where two or more answers are given, any of them is correct.

Exercise 1

1. b) were
2. b) had caught
3. a) had
4. c) had taken
5. b) had practiced
6. c) were
7. c) Had we left
8. b) understood
9. b) would be
10. c) had booked

Exercise 2

1. had
2. had been
3. lived
4. would have bought
5. would enjoy / would have enjoyed
6. would have won
7. had not had / hadn't had
8. had
9. had read
10. needed