

FCE 6.1 Conditionals

In this lesson we will review conditional structures. These occur every day in conversation, so they are important to master. First, a review of the four types...

Conditional sentences are a type of **complex sentence**. They have two parts: a condition (often introduced by *if* or *unless*) and a result. The condition sets up a situation, and the result tells us what will happen if that situation occurs. For example, in the sentence “*If it rains, we will stay indoors*”, the phrase “*If it rains*” is the condition, and “*we will stay indoors*” is the result.

There are four main types of conditional sentences. The chart summarizes the information below it.

Type	Use	Formula	Example
Zero	general truths or facts	<i>If + [simple present], ... [simple present]</i>	<i>If you heat ice, it melts.</i>
First	real possibilities in the future	<i>If + [simple present], ... will + [base verb]</i>	<i>If it rains, I will stay home.</i>
Second	unreal or hypothetical situations	<i>If + [simple past], ... would + [base verb]</i>	<i>If I won the lottery, I would travel.</i>
Third	unreal past hypotheticals	<i>If + [past perfect], ... would have + [past participle]</i>	<i>If I had studied, I would have passed.</i>

Zero conditional sentences: facts and general truths. The zero conditional is the simplest type of conditional sentence. It's used to express facts and general truths. **The zero conditional formula is: *If + [simple present], ... [simple present]*.**

If you heat ice, it melts.

In this sentence, the condition is “*If you heat ice,*” and the result is “*it melts.*” This is a general truth, as it's always the case that if you heat ice, it melts.

Here are a few more examples:

If you mix blue and yellow, you get green.

If it's a weekday, I go to work.

If you don't eat, you get hungry.

Remember, the zero conditional is all about facts and general truths. It's not about specific situations or possibilities. It's about what's always true.

First conditional sentences: real possibilities. The first conditional is used to talk about real and possible situations in the future. **The first conditional formula is: *If + [simple present], ... will + [infinitive]*.**

If it rains, I will stay home.

In this sentence, the condition is “*If it rains,*” and the result is “*I will stay home.*” This is a real possibility: “It might rain, and if it does, I will stay home.”

Here are a few more examples:

If you study hard, you will pass the exam.

If I see her, I will say hello.

If they don't hurry, they will miss the train.

Remember, the first conditional is all about real possibilities in the future and what might happen. It's not about general truths or hypothetical situations.

Second conditional sentences: unreal or improbable situations. The second conditional is used to talk about unreal or improbable situations in the present or future. **The second conditional formula is: *If + [simple past], ... would + [infinitive]*.**

If I won the lottery, I would buy a house.

In this sentence, the condition is "*If I won the lottery*," and the result is "*I would buy a house*." This is an unreal situation: "I probably won't win the lottery, but if I did, I would buy a house."

Here are a few more examples:

If I were you, I would take the job.

If it snowed in the Sahara, it would be a miracle.

If they knew the truth, they would be shocked.

To summarize, the second conditional is all about unreal or improbable situations. It's not about what will happen but what *could* happen in an alternate reality.

Third conditional sentences: past hypotheticals. The third conditional is used to talk about unreal situations in the past. **The third conditional formula is: *If + [past perfect], ... would have + [past participle]*.**

If I had studied harder, I would have passed the exam.

In this sentence, the condition is "*If I had studied harder*," and the result is "*I would have passed the exam*."

This unreal situation refers to something that could have but didn't happen: "*I didn't study hard, and I didn't pass the exam. But if I had studied harder (in the past), I would have passed the exam (in the past)*."

Here are a few more examples:

If she had seen the sign, she wouldn't have parked there.

If we had left earlier, we would have caught the train.

If he hadn't forgotten his wallet, he would have paid the bill.

Remember, the third conditional is all about unreal situations in the past. It's not about what did happen but what *could* have happened in a different past.

Let's use the following exercise to review/practice the formulas. Match the two halves of each sentence.

a) If you **did** more revision, ...

b) If it **snows**, ...

c) If I **have** time, ...

d) If Helen **comes** round, ...

e) If there **had been** a vote, ...

f) If they **finish** early, ...

g) If you **swam** regularly, ...

h) If I'd **known** about the risk, ...

1) we'll **get** our skis out.

2) she'll **be** able to tell you.

3) Sam and Bernie usually **have** a coffee.

4) you'd **pass** the exam.

5) I'd never **have eaten** seafood.

6) they **would have lost**.

7) I **like** to walk to work.

8) your body **would be** in better shape.

Now, fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb in parentheses.

1. If you heat ice, it _____ (melt).
2. If it rains tomorrow, we _____ (cancel) the picnic.
3. If I _____ (have) a million dollars, I would travel the world.
4. If I had studied harder, I _____ (pass) the exam.
5. Plants die if they _____ (not get) enough water.
6. She _____ (miss) her flight if she doesn't leave now.
7. If I were you, I _____ (accept) that job offer.
8. If they _____ (leave) earlier, they wouldn't have missed the train.
9. What _____ you _____ (do) if you saw a ghost?
10. If you had told me about the party, I _____ (come).

OJO: In conditional structures, *will*, *would*, and *would have* can be replaced by other modal verbs to change the tone, add nuance, or express different levels of certainty, ability, permission, or obligation. Here is a breakdown of what you can use to replace them in each conditional structure:

Replacing "will" (First Conditional). Instead of a certain future result (**will**), you can express possibility, permission, or obligation:

- **Can** (Ability/Permission): *If you finish your homework, you **can** go play outside.*
- **May / Might** (Possibility): *If it rains, the game **might** be canceled.*
- **Should** (Advice/Expectation): *If you want to pass, you **should** study tonight.*
- **Must / Have to** (Obligation): *If you enter the building, you **must** show your ID.*

Replacing "Would" (Second Conditional). Instead of a hypothetical certainty (**would**), you can express hypothetical ability, permission, or possibility:

- **Could** (Hypothetical Ability/Permission): *If I had more money, I **could** buy that house.* (I would be able to buy it).
- **Might** (Hypothetical Possibility): *If she asked him out, he **might** say yes.* (It is possible, but not certain).

Replacing "Would Have" (Third Conditional). Instead of a past certainty that didn't happen (**would have**), you can express what was possible or able to happen in the past:

- **Could have** (Past Ability/Possibility): *If I had trained harder, I **could have** won the race.* (I had the capability to win).
- **Might have** (Past Weak Possibility): *If you had looked closer, you **might have** seen the mistake.* (It was a slight possibility).
- **Should have** (Past Advice/Regret): *If you knew it was a secret, you **should have** kept quiet.* (Used to express the correct past action).

Also, the word "if" can be replaced with other words.

- The word "when" can replace "if", but only in the zero and first conditionals. Look at #1 above. The word "when" can replace "if" because it always happens; there is no doubt as implied with "if".
- The word "unless" can replace "if" when we want to create a negative structure. "Unless" means "except if" or "if... not." It introduces a negative condition that must happen to prevent a specific result. OJO: Because "unless" already contains a negative meaning (*not*), you must always use a positive verb

right after it. Using a negative verb creates a double negative, which occurs in Spanish but never in English.

✗ **Incorrect:** Unless it **doesn't** rain, we will go to the park.

✓ **Correct:** Unless it **rains**, we will go to the park. (*We will go to the park, except if it rains*).

Look at how you can transform an "if... not" sentence into an "unless" sentence without changing the meaning:

If ... Not	Unless
If you do not study, you will fail.	Unless you study, you will fail.
If it does not stop snowing, I won't drive.	Unless it stops snowing, I won't drive.
If you do not have a ticket, you can't enter.	Unless you have a ticket, you can't enter.

Correct any mistakes with *unless* in these sentences. Tick the correct sentences (2).

- ☐ a) There will be no improvement in my tennis unless I don't get some training. *unless* _____
- ☐ b) I will not remain silent about the letter unless you give me my money back. *unless* _____
- ☐ c) People hardly ever use candlelight today unless there isn't anything wrong with the power supply. *unless* _____
- ☐ d) There isn't much to do in the city unless you haven't got friends. *unless* _____
- ☐ e) You must stop working so hard unless you don't want to end up in hospital sooner or later. *unless* _____
- ☐ f) If there were no televisions, we wouldn't know much about other countries unless we visited them. *unless* _____

We will dedicate several lessons to conditional structures, but the final activity in this lesson offers speaking practice. Finish these sentences.

- a) Unless I get up early tomorrow, ...
- b) If I had enough money, ...
- c) My life would be a lot easier if ...
- d) If I hadn't come to class today, ...