Conditional Sentences

- There are four types of conditional sentences.
- It's important to use the correct structure for each of these different conditional sentences because they express varying meanings.
- Pay attention to verb tense when using different conditional modes.
- Use a comma after the if-clause when the if-clause precedes the main clause.

Conditional sentences are statements discussing known factors or hypothetical situations and their consequences. Complete conditional sentences contain a conditional <u>clause</u> (often referred to as the if-clause) and the consequence. Consider the following sentences:

If a certain condition is true, then a particular result happens.

I would travel around the world if I won the lottery.

When water reaches 100 degrees, it boils.

What Are the Different Types of Conditional Sentences?

There are four different types of conditional sentences in English. Each expresses a different degree of probability that a situation will occur or would have occurred under certain circumstances.

- Zero Conditional Sentences
- First Conditional Sentences
- Second Conditional Sentences
- Third Conditional Sentences

Let's look at each of these different types of conditional sentences in more detail.

How to Use Zero Conditional Sentences

Zero conditional sentences express general truths—situations in which one thing always causes another. When you use a zero conditional, you're talking about a general truth rather than a specific instance of something. Consider the following examples:

If you don't brush your teeth, you get cavities.

When people smoke cigarettes, their health suffers.

There are a couple of things to take note of in the above sentences in which the zero conditional is used. First, when using the zero conditional, the correct tense to use in both clauses is the <u>simple present tense</u>. A common mistake is to use the simple future tense.

When people smoke cigarettes, their health will suffer .

Secondly, notice that the words if and when can be used interchangeably in these zero conditional sentences. This is because the outcome will always be the same, so it doesn't matter "if" or "when" it happens.

How to Use First Conditional Sentences

First conditional sentences are used to express situations in which the outcome is likely (but not guaranteed) to happen in the future. Look at the examples below:

If you rest, you will feel better.

If you set your mind to a goal, you'll eventually achieve it.

Note that we use the simple present tense in the if-clause and simple future tense in the main clause—that is, the clause that expresses the likely outcome. This is how we indicate that under a certain condition (as expressed in the if-clause), a specific result will likely happen in the future. Examine some of the common mistakes people make using the first conditional structure:

If you will rest , you will feel better.

If you rest , you will feel better.

Explanation: Use the <u>simple present tense</u> in the if-clause.

If you set your mind to a goal, you eventually achieve it.

If you set your mind to a goal, you'll eventually achieve it.

Explanation: Use the zero conditional (i.e., simple present + simple present) only when a certain result is guaranteed. If the result is likely, use the first conditional (i.e., simple present + simple future).

How to Use Second Conditional Sentences

Second conditional sentences are useful for expressing outcomes that are completely unrealistic or will not likely happen in the future. Consider the examples below:

If I inherited a billion dollars, I would travel to the moon.

If I owned a zoo, I might let people interact with the animals more.

Notice the correct way to structure second conditional sentences is to use the simple past tense in the if-clause and an auxiliary modal verb (e.g., could, should, would, might) in the main clause (the one that expresses the unrealistic or unlikely outcome). The following sentences illustrate a couple of the common mistakes people make when using the second conditional:

If I inherit a billion dollars, I would travel to the moon.

If I inherited a billion dollars, I would travel to the moon.

Explanation: When applying the second conditional, use the simple past tense in the if-clause.

If I owned a zoo, I will let people interact with the animals more.

If I owned a zoo, I might let people interact with the animals more.

Explanation: Use a modal auxiliary verb in the main clause when using the second conditional mood to express the unlikelihood that the result will actually happen.

How to Use Third Conditional Sentences

Third conditional sentences are used to explain that present circumstances would be different if something different had happened in the past. Look at the following examples:

If you had told me you needed a ride, I would have left earlier.

If I had cleaned the house, I could have gone to the movies.

These sentences express a condition that was likely enough, but did not actually happen in the past. The speaker in the first sentence was capable of leaving early, but did not. Along these same lines, the speaker in the second sentence was capable of cleaning the house, but did not. These are all conditions that were likely, but regrettably did not happen.

Note that when using the third conditional, we use the <u>past perfect</u> (i.e., had + past participle) in the if-clause. The modal auxiliary (would, could, should, etc.) + have + past participle in the main clause expresses the theoretical situation that could have happened.

Consider these common mistakes when applying the third conditional:

If you would have told me you needed a ride, I would have left earlier.

If you had told me you needed a ride, I would have left earlier.

Explanation: With third conditional sentences, do not use a modal auxiliary verb in the if-clause.

If I had cleaned the house, I could go to the movies.

If I had cleaned the house, I could have gone to the movies.

Explanation: The third conditional mood expresses a situation that could have only happened in the past if a certain condition had been met. That's why we use the modal auxiliary verb + have + the past participle.

Exceptions and Special Cases When Using Conditional Sentences

As with most topics in the English language, conditional sentences often present special cases in which unique rules must be applied.

Use of the Simple Future in the If-Clause

Generally speaking, the simple future should be used only in the main clause. One exception is when the action in the if-clause will take place after the action in the main clause. For example, consider the following sentence:

If aspirin will ease my headache, I will take a couple tonight.

The action in the if-clause is the aspirin easing the headache, which will take place only after the speaker takes them later that night.

"Were to" in the If-Clause

The verb phrase were to is sometimes used in conditional sentences when the likely or unlikely result is particularly awful or unthinkable. In this case, were to is used to place emphasis on this potential outcome. Consider these sentences:

If I were to be sick, I would miss another day of work.

If she were to be late again, she would have to have a conference with the manager.

If the rent were to have been a penny more, they would not have been able to pay it.

Note that the emphatic "were to" can be used to describe hypothetical scenarios in the present, future, and past.

Punctuating Conditional Sentences

Despite the complex nature of conditional sentences, punctuating them properly is really simple!

Here's the skinny:

Use a comma after the if-clause when the if-clause precedes the main clause.

If I'd had time, I would have cleaned the house.

If the main clause precedes the if-clause, no punctuation is necessary.

I would have cleaned the house if I'd had time.