

University of Tikrit

College of Education for Humanities

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English Grammar

Conditional Sentences in English

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1. Introduction

Conditional sentences are among the most important structures in English grammar because they enable speakers and writers to express conditions, possibilities, consequences, predictions, hypotheses, and unreal situations.

A conditional sentence typically consists of two clauses:

1. The **if-clause** (condition)
2. The **main clause** (result)

Example

- If it rains, we will stay at home.

In this sentence:

- *If it rains* = condition
- *We will stay at home* = result

Conditional sentences are widely used in everyday communication, academic writing, scientific reasoning, and professional discourse because they allow speakers to discuss real and hypothetical situations.

2. Definition of Conditional Sentences

A conditional sentence is a sentence that expresses a relationship between a condition and its consequence.

General Formula

If-Clause + Main Clause

or

Main Clause + If-Clause

Examples

- If you study hard, you will pass the examination.
- You will pass the examination if you study hard.

Both structures are grammatically correct.

Punctuation Rule

When the if-clause comes first, a comma is usually required.

- If you work hard, you will succeed.

When the main clause comes first, no comma is necessary.

- You will succeed if you work hard.
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3. Types of Conditional Sentences

English traditionally recognizes four main types of conditional sentences:

1. Zero Conditional
2. First Conditional
3. Second Conditional
4. Third Conditional

Each type expresses a different degree of reality or possibility.

4. Zero Conditional

The zero conditional expresses facts, general truths, scientific principles, and habitual actions.

Structure

If + Present Simple, Present Simple

Formula

If + Subject + Verb (Present)

→ Subject + Verb (Present)

Examples

- If water reaches 100°C, it boils.
- If you heat ice, it melts.
- If people do not eat, they become hungry.

Characteristics

The result is always true whenever the condition occurs.

Therefore, the zero conditional is frequently used in:

- Scientific statements
- Universal truths
- Instructions
- General facts

5. First Conditional

The first conditional expresses a real or possible future situation.

Structure

If + Present Simple, Will + Base Verb

Formula

If + Present Simple

→ Will + Infinitive

Examples

- If it rains tomorrow, we will cancel the trip.
- If she studies hard, she will pass the exam.
- If you arrive early, we will start on time.

Characteristics

The condition is possible and likely to occur.

The speaker believes that the situation may happen in the future.

6. Second Conditional

The second conditional expresses hypothetical, unreal, or unlikely situations in the present or future.

Structure

If + Past Simple, Would + Base Verb

Formula

If + Past Simple

→ Would + Infinitive

Examples

- If I had more money, I would buy a new car.
- If she lived nearby, she would visit us often.
- If they studied harder, they would achieve better results.

Characteristics

The situation is imaginary or unlikely.

The speaker knows that the condition is not true or is unlikely to become true.

Special Use of "Were"

In formal English, *were* is often used with all subjects.

Examples:

- If I were rich, I would travel around the world.
- If he were here, he would help us.

This usage is known as the **subjunctive were**.

7. Third Conditional

The third conditional refers to unreal situations in the past.

It describes events that did not happen and their imagined consequences.

Structure

If + Past Perfect, Would Have + Past Participle

Formula

If + Had + Past Participle

→ Would Have + Past Participle

Examples

- If I had studied harder, I would have passed the examination.
- If they had arrived earlier, they would have caught the train.
- If she had known the answer, she would have told us.

Characteristics

The condition was impossible because the past cannot be changed.

The speaker is imagining a different past result.

8. Summary

Conditional sentences express relationships between conditions and results. They are essential for discussing facts, possibilities, predictions, hypotheses, and unreal situations.

The four principal types are:

1. **Zero Conditional** – facts and general truths.
2. **First Conditional** – real future possibilities.

3. **Second Conditional** – unreal or hypothetical present and future situations.

4. **Third Conditional** – unreal past situations.

In addition, English employs mixed conditionals and alternative conditional expressions such as *unless*, *provided that*, and *as long as*. Mastering these structures enables learners to express complex relationships between events accurately and effectively, thereby improving both their grammatical competence and communicative proficiency.