

Conditionals

English B1

What this topic teaches

If sentences imagine worlds. English has three, and the verb forms tell the listener **how real** the world is. Chinese says and changes nothing; English changes the verbs to show reality .

- **Zero conditional:** always true. *If you heat ice, it melts.*
- **First conditional:** a real possible future. *If it rains tomorrow, we will stay home.*
- **Second conditional:** an imagined, unreal present or future. *If I **were** a bird, I **would** fly to school.*
- Memory hook: the verbs **step backwards** to show unreality. Present stays present for facts, steps to *will* for a real future, and steps to the past for an imagined world. The past form is a costume , not a time.

Zero conditional: the laws of the universe

If + present simple, present simple.

- *If you heat ice, it melts. If I drink coffee at night, I don't sleep.*
- For facts, rules and habits – things that are true every time.
- You can swap *if* for *when* here: *When you heat ice, it melts.* Same truth, same tense.

First conditional: the real future

If + present simple, will + base verb.

- *If it **rains** tomorrow, we'll **stay** home.* Real possibility, real plan.
- – the Chinese verbs never change; the English ones split the work: *if* side = present simple (the gate rule from topic 5), result side = *will*.
- △ Never “*If it **will** rain, we'll stay home.*” *if* is a time gate; *will* cannot pass through it.
- Other *will*-family results work too: *If you study, you're **going to** pass. If it's hot, we **can** swim.*

Second conditional: the imagined world

If + past simple, would + base verb.

- *If I **were** a bird, I **would** fly to school.* (I am not a bird. The past form is a costume.)
- *If I **won** the lottery , I **would** **buy** my teacher a holiday.*

- – If I **were** you, I would study more. The famous advice formula.
- Δ was or were? Formal English prefers **were** for everyone: *If I were you, if she were rich.* *If I was* is common in speech, but *were* is the exam answer.
- Δ Never “*If I would win, I would buy...*” – *would* lives on the result side only. One *would* per imagination.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- Δ **The costume is not a time.** *If I had a million yuan* is not about the past – the past form signals “imagined”. changes nothing in Chinese; English changes the verb to show the world is unreal.
- Δ **Don’t put *will* inside the *if*.** The gate rule again: *If it rains, we’ll stay home*, never “*if it will rain*”.
- Δ **Don’t put *would* inside the *if*.** “*If I would be rich...*” $\times$. *Would* stands on the result side: *If I were rich, I would travel*.
- Δ **Choose the world honestly.** *If I have time, I’ll help you* (possible!) vs *If I had time, I’d help you* (I don’t have time, and we both know it). The second is how English says a polite no.

Say it aloud

Build three worlds.

- Zero: If I don’t sleep, I can’t think. A law of the universe.
- First: If the weekend is sunny, we’ll go cycling. A real plan for a real sky.
- Second: If I were the head teacher, I would cancel Mondays. Unfortunately, I am not, and Mondays know it.
- Advice swap: If I were you, I’d bring an umbrella. Your turn – advise me back.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *If you heat ice, it ____ (melt).* – **melts**. Zero conditional: a law of the universe.
2. *If it ____ (rain) tomorrow, we’ll stay home.* – **rains**. Real future, and *if* is a gate: no *will* inside.
3. *If I ____ (be) you, I would study more.* – **were**. An imagined world, and the formal costume is *were*.
4. “*If I would win the lottery...*” – $\times \rightarrow$ **If I won the lottery, I would buy...** *would* lives on the result side only.
5. *If I ____ (have) time, I’d help you.* – **had**. The imagined version – meaning: I don’t have time, and we both know it.