

wish and if only

English B2

What this topic teaches

Wish and *if only* are the polite cousins of the conditionals. They express a desire for a different reality – and the verbs step backwards exactly as the conditionals taught you.

- A different **present**: *I **wish** I **were** taller.* (I am not. The past form is the costume again.)
- A different **past**: *I **wish** I **had studied** harder.* (I didn't. The time machine again.)
- A different **future/annoyance**: *I **wish** you **would** stop singing.* (Please. The cat agrees.)
- Memory hook: *wish* is a lamp, and the verb inside the wish wears the costume of the unreal: past for now, past perfect for then, *would* for other people's behaviour.

wish + past: the present you want changed

I wish / if only + past simple.

Reality	The wish
I am not tall.	I wish I were taller.
We don't have a car.	If only we had a car.
She can't come.	I wish she could come.

- *if only* is the stronger, more dramatic cousin: *If only I were rich!* (said while looking at noodle prices.)
- $\triangle$ *were* for everyone in formal wishes: *I wish I **were** you.* The same costume rule as *If I were you.*
- $\triangle$ The wish is unreal, so the verb steps back – but the time is **now**. *I wish I was taller* is common speech; *were* is the exam answer.

wish + past perfect: regretting the past

I wish / if only + had + participle.

- *I wish I **had brought** an umbrella.* (I didn't. I am wet.)
- *If only I **had listened** to the weather forecast.*
- This is the third conditional's if-side, standing alone. The result is silence and rain.

wish + would: complaints and hopes

I wish + would + base verb – for things you want to **change**, usually other people's behaviour or annoying situations.

- *I wish you **would stop** singing.* (Please. Immediately.)
- *I wish it **would stop** raining.*
- △ Never *would* about yourself: “*I wish I would study more*” × – you control you, so use *could* or the past: *I wish I **could** focus. I wish I **studied** more.* You can't complain to the lamp about yourself.
- △ *hope* vs *wish*: *hope* is for real possibilities and takes the present or *will*: *I **hope** you pass. wish* is for the unreal. *I hope you pass* (you might!) vs *I wish you would pass* (doubtful) vs *I wish you had passed* (you didn't).

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ ... **covers everything; English splits it.** Present wish → past form; past regret → past perfect; complaint → *would*. The time of the unreal thing picks the costume.
- △ **wish is not hope.** covers both in Chinese. *I hope it rains* (possible) vs *I wish it would rain* (unlikely, or a complaint about the dry week).
- △ **Don't add the conditional result.** “*I wish I had studied harder, I would have passed*” × – *wish* sentences end at the wish. The *would have* belongs to the third conditional.
- △ **The lamp needs the costume.** “*I wish I am taller*” × – the real present inside a wish breaks the spell: *I wish I **were** taller.*

Say it aloud

Make three wishes. The lamp is listening, and it checks grammar.

- I wish I were taller. The top shelf remains my enemy.
- If only I had started the homework yesterday. The homework sends no regards.
- I wish the weekend would come faster. It won't. It enjoys this.
- And one real hope: I hope we all pass. That's a real possibility – we have grammar on our side now.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *I wish I _____ (be) taller.* – **were**. The present wish wears the past costume.
2. *I wish I _____ (bring) an umbrella.* (I didn't; I am wet) – **had brought**. The past regret wears the past perfect.
3. *I wish it _____ (stop) raining.* (annoying, ongoing) – **would stop**. The complaint takes *would*.
4. *I _____ you pass the exam.* (a real possibility) – **hope**. Real futures take *hope*, not *wish*.
5. *"I wish I would study more."* – $\times \rightarrow$ **I wish I studied more / could focus**. No *would* about yourself.