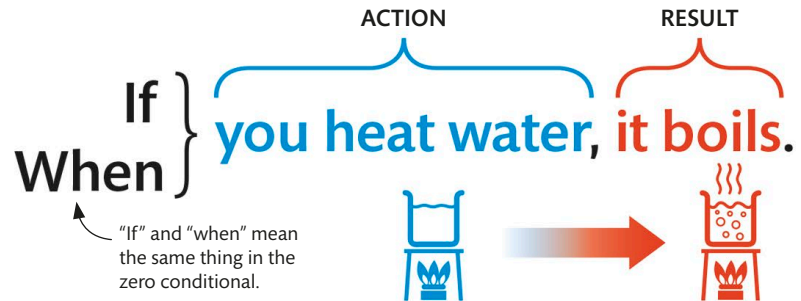# 29 Conditional sentences

Conditional sentences are used to describe real or hypothetical results of real or hypothetical situations. They can use many different verb forms.

See also:
Present simple **1**   Imperatives **6**
Past simple **7**   Future with "will" **18**

29.1   THE ZERO CONDITIONAL

The zero conditional, also called the "real" conditional, refers to things that are always true. It is used to describe the direct result of an action.

ACTION   RESULT

If / When **you heat water, it boils.**

"If" and "when" mean the same thing in the zero conditional.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

If you heat ice, it melts.

When you put a rock in water, it sinks.

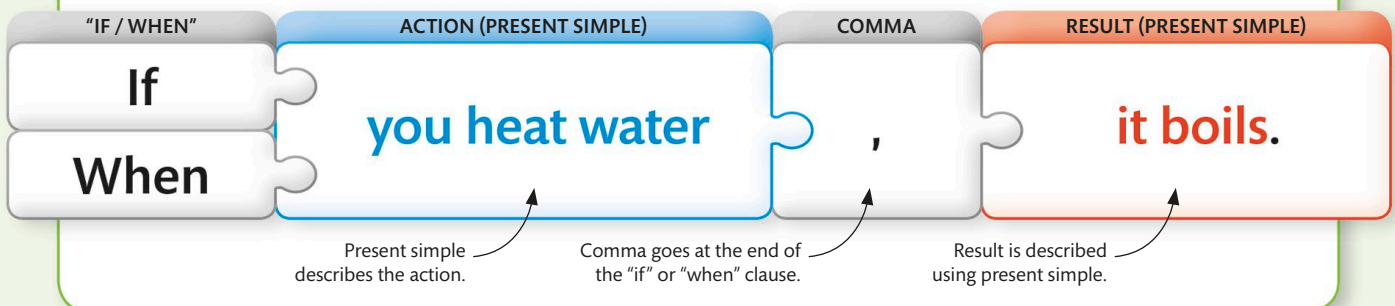The result clause can go to the beginning of the sentence. The comma is removed in this case.

If you drop an apple, it falls.

Oil floats when you pour it onto water.

HOW TO FORM

"IF / WHEN"	ACTION (PRESENT SIMPLE)	COMMA	RESULT (PRESENT SIMPLE)
If / When	you heat water	,	it boils.

Present simple describes the action.

Comma goes at the end of the "if" or "when" clause.

Result is described using present simple.

CONDITIONALS WITH IMPERATIVES

Imperatives can be used in conditional sentences. The "if" clause describes a hypothetical situation and the imperative clause describes what someone should do if that hypothetical situation actually happens.

SITUATION   SUGGESTED ACTION

If **you're cold**, **put on a coat**.
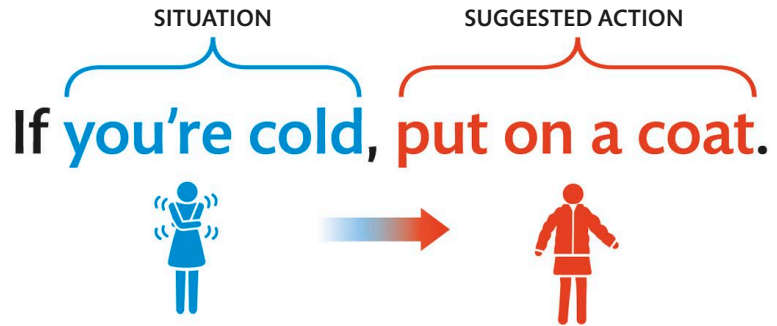
FURTHER EXAMPLES

If **you feel sick**, **call a doctor**.

If **the dog's hungry**, **feed him**.

If **the traffic is bad**, **cycle to work**.

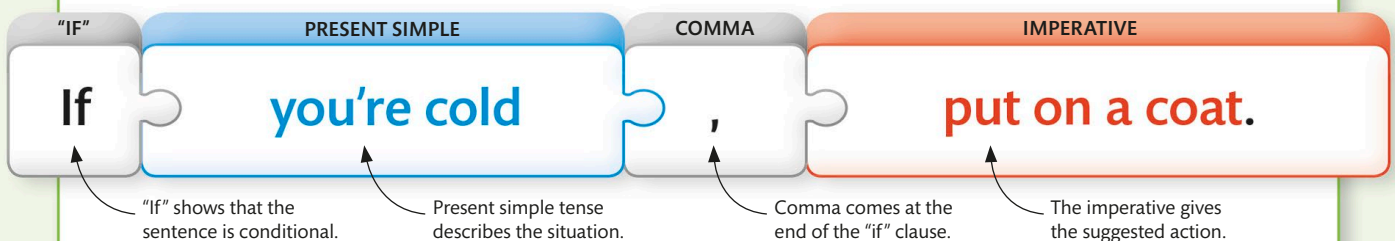If **the children behave badly**, **call me**.
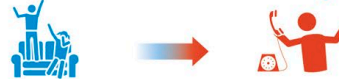
Negative

Don't stay up late if **you're tired**.

The order is reversed, so there is no comma.

Let me know if **you need help**.

HOW TO FORM

"IF"	PRESENT SIMPLE	COMMA	IMPERATIVE
If	you're cold	,	put on a coat.

"If" shows that the sentence is conditional.

Present simple tense describes the situation.

Comma comes at the end of the "if" clause.

The imperative gives the suggested action.

29.3 THE FIRST CONDITIONAL

The first conditional, also called the "future real" conditional, uses
"if" to describe a realistic action that might lead to a future result.

LIKELY ACTION   FUTURE RESULT

If I save enough money, I'll go on a cruise.

HOW TO FORM

The first conditional is usually introduced by an "if" clause, followed
by the present simple. The future with "will" expresses the result.

"IF"	PRESENT SIMPLE	COMMA	FUTURE WITH "WILL"
If	I save enough money	,	I'll go on a cruise.

"If" shows that the sentence is conditional.

Present simple tense describes suggested action.

Comma goes at the end of the "if" clause.

Future with "will" describes the result.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

If I go jogging, I'll lose weight.

If it snows, I'll go skiing.

If we go to Africa, we'll go on safari.

If I get the job, I'll buy a new suit.
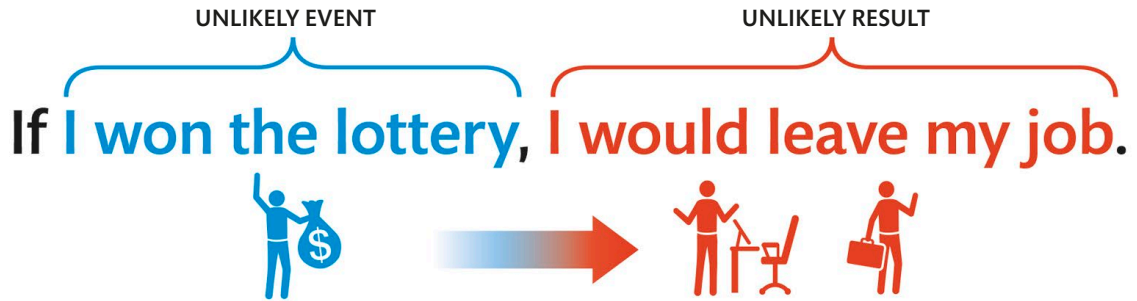
If I cook, will you do the dishes?

I won't go outside if it rains.

29.4 THE SECOND CONDITIONAL

The second conditional, also called the "unreal" conditional, uses "if" to describe
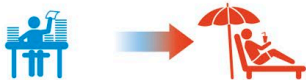an unlikely or unreal action or event. The described result is also very unlikely.

UNLIKELY EVENT   UNLIKELY RESULT

If I won the lottery, I would leave my job.

HOW TO FORM

The second conditional is usually introduced by an "if" clause with a past simple verb.
"Would" or "could" plus the base form of the main verb expresses the result.

"IF"	PAST SIMPLE	COMMA	"WOULD / COULD" + BASE FORM
If	I won the lottery	,	I would leave my job.

"If" shows that the
sentence is conditional.

Past simple tense
describes the action.

Comma goes at the
end of the "if" clause.

Result is described
using "would" + verb.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

If he wasn't so busy, he'd take a break.

I'd call her if I knew her number.

If I moved to Scotland, I'd live in a cottage.

If I saw a ghost, I would be terrified.

If I had more time, I could take up karate.

If I learned English, I could visit London.

THE THIRD CONDITIONAL

The third conditional, also called the "past unreal" conditional, is used to describe unreal situations in the past. It is often used to express regret about the past because the hypothetical situation that it describes is now impossible as a consequence of another past action.

UNREAL PAST SITUATION   UNREAL PAST RESULT

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

This didn't happen.   So this didn't happen either.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

If **I had woken up on time**,
I would have done my hair.

If **you had been wearing a coat**,
you might have stayed warm.

"Might" means this possibly would have happened.

If **I had studied harder**,
I could have been a doctor.

"Could" means this possibly would have happened.

If **I had known it was your birthday**,
I would have bought you a present.

HOW TO FORM

"IF"	"HAD" + PAST PARTICIPLE	"WOULD / COULD / MIGHT"	"HAVE" + PAST PARTICIPLE
If	we had left earlier	, we would	have caught the train.

The "if " clause is the unreal past condition.

Using different modals changes the certainty of the imagined result.

The conditional clause is the unreal result.

THE MIXED CONDITIONAL

SECOND CONDITIONAL

The second conditional is used to talk about hypothetical situations in the present.

PAST SIMPLE

If I didn't believe in astrology, I wouldn't read my horoscope.

"WOULD" + INFINITIVE

THIRD CONDITIONAL

The third conditional is used to talk about hypothetical situations in the past.

PAST PERFECT

If I had known he was an Aquarius, I would not have gone out with him.

"WOULD" + "HAVE" + PAST PARTICIPLE

MIXED CONDITIONAL

Mixed conditionals are usually used to talk about hypothetical present reults of unreal past situations.

Unreal past.

If you had been born a month earlier, you would be a Virgo like me.

Unreal present.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Mixed conditionals are often used to express regret.

If you hadn't forgotten to bring the keys, we wouldn't be locked out of the house.

If I had finished my assignment sooner, I could be out with my friends today.

Mixed conditionals refer to future situations when used with future time markers.

You would be starting at a new school tomorrow if you hadn't failed your exams.

We would be on a beach in Greece by now if we hadn't missed our flight.