

USING UNREAL CONDITIONS TO EXPLAIN CAUSE AND EFFECT TO OFFER ADVICE

Situation

Benny, Tony and Tom used to play tennis at the same club. Now Benny is the only one who still plays there, and he wants to know what happened to his friends.

Benny: You don't go to the club anymore. You used to go two or three times a week. Why have you stopped playing?

Tony: I don't have time anymore. ¹ I'm so busy these days that I just can't make it. ²

Tom: My arm bothers me when I play a lot, so I've been jogging instead.

Explanation

Both Tony and Tom want to play tennis, but neither one of them does. Each one has a reason for not going to the club.

Benny: *Why* have you stopped?

Tony: I don't have time (cause/reason).

Benny: *Why* have you stopped?

Tom: My arm bothers me. (cause/reason)

Another typical way that Tony and Tom might answer Benny's question is *as follows*:

Tony: **If I had time, I would go.**

Tom: **If my arm didn't bother me, I would go.**

The two responses above are examples of the **present unreal condition**.

¹ Note that in casual conversation, native speakers sometimes eliminate the word "because" when answering a question starting with "why?"

² **Make it** is a very popular idiomatic expression with two key meanings which are very different from each other. (1) "I can't **make it**" in the above sense means "I can't **meet an appointment on time**." Another common sentence with this expression is: "The meeting starts at 4:00, but Bill can't **make it** until 4:30 because he will be in court all afternoon." In this sentence we know (a) that Bill will attend the meeting; and (b) that he will be half an hour late because of his court duties on that day. (2) The other typical usage of the high-frequency idiomatic expression "**make it**" means to "be (economically) successful." For example: "Joe dreamed of being a famous inventor his whole life. He finally **made it**." This sentence tells that Joe had wanted to be a famous inventor since he was a child. After many years, he has become a famous inventor. "He **made it**." When someone has become **very** successful, we often say: "He **made it big** in international trade." [He is very successful in the international trade field.] "She **made it big** in Hong Kong." [She moved to Hong Kong and became very successful there.]

Function of the Present Unreal Condition

The functions of the present unreal condition are:

- to **explain** or relate two situations or two actions to each other by means of: **cause** and **effect**;
- to **answer** the question **why**?

When using the present unreal condition, the speaker tells the listener: if the facts or circumstances were different, the result would also be different. It is a grammatically odd way to explain *why*. Therefore, you do not have to *use* this construction. You need to understand it thoroughly, however, since native speakers use it all the time.

Form of the Present Unreal Condition

In order to understand the form, let's answer a related question - why do we call this form of speech by the name "Present Unreal Condition?"

- **Present** because:
 - the time of the **actions** described is **present**.
 - Remember that *tense* and *time* are not always the same in English. ³
- **Unreal** because:
 - the reality of the **actions** is actually the **opposite** of what the verb *appears* to express. ⁴

Because the *relationship* of the two clauses is critical in order to convey the meaning, that is, to explain *cause* and *effect*, it is very important to form *both* clauses correctly. The relationship of one clause *depends* on the other for meaning.

You will need **two clauses** ⁵ to express cause and effect using the present unreal condition. They are:

1. The Causal Clause
2. The Effect Clause

³ When using or listening to actions described by the present unreal conditions, keep in mind that this construction is a kind of grammatical "**trick**." The actions presented **appear** to be past (the past tense is used in the "if-clause"), but these actions are actually present time.

⁴ **un** = *not* = *opposite*

⁵ Every clause consists of a subject and a verb, in time.

CAUSAL CLAUSE FORMATION

To understand how to **form** the causal clause, see how the clause is formed both in “real” time and in “unreal” time. As mentioned earlier, the unreal condition is a kind of grammatical “trick.” Even though it is a “trick,” it is utterly rule governed.

Let’s start by repeating the earlier question and answer.

- **Why** don’t you play tennis anymore?
- I don’t play **because my arm bothers me**.

Real Cause	Tense	Truth Value ⁶
My arm bothers me	present	same as reality

When framing the answer in grammatical reality –

- the time of the action and the tense of the verb are the same: present
- the “truth value” of the action (affirmative) matches reality: affirmative

The speaker could also answer the question as follows:

- **Why** don’t you play tennis anymore?
- I would play **if my arm didn’t bother me**. OR
- If my arm didn’t bother me, I would play.

“Unreal” Cause	Tense	Truth Value
If my arm did not bother me	past	the opposite of reality

When using the unreal construction to frame the answer –

- the time of the action and the tense of the verb are not the same
 - present time action > bothers
 - past tense formation > did bother
- the “truth value” of the action does *not* match reality – it inverts
 - affirmative action > bothers
 - negative formation > not (bother)

⁶ “Truth value” is just a grammar term here. Is the *actual* action *affirmative* or *negative* – and does the grammar *match* the action as it is expressed?

You can see why we say that this structure is based on a sort of “grammar trick.” If you look at this structure, the actions do not appear to mirror “reality.” That is why we call this structure the “present unreal.”

We call the tense “unreal condition” because we introduce the cause/the reason behind the situation with the word *if*.

- If *always* introduces a condition
- A condition always *limits* the action in the *main* clause ⁷

EFFECT CLAUSE FORMATION

Like all conditions, the present unreal condition *limits* the action in the *main* clause.

When using (or trying to understand) unreal conditions, you need to understand that the *structure* (the *grammatical formation*) of the cause clause (if +) requires a specific structure in the effect – the resulting – clause as well. The grammar *limits* the way you may express the effect clause in order to give it meaning.

Let’s repeat the earlier question and answer, so that we can focus on the structure.

- Why don’t you play tennis anymore?
- I don’t play because my arm bothers me.

The *effect*, or the *result* of my painful arm is that I *do not play*.

First, note the structure where the grammar mirrors reality.

Real Effect	Verb Tense	Truth Value
I do not play	Present	Negative

Unreal Effect	Verb Tense	Truth Value
I would play	Conditional (would)	Affirmative

If you state your *cause* using the unreal condition – “If my arm didn’t bother me” – then you **must** state the effect using the unreal effect structure, as well.

This is so because the two actions – the cause and the effect – are linked to each other.

⁷ **For example:** “If I have time this afternoon, I will draft that motion.” My drafting the motion is *contingent* upon my time availability this afternoon. My future action (drafting the motion) is *limited by*, *dependent on*, and *contingent on* whether I have time this afternoon. *If* I do, I will draft the motion. *If* I do not, I won’t draft the motion.

To say that they are “linked” means that one gives meaning to the other, and *explains* the other. Therefore, if expressing cause and effect in *real* time, you must structure *both* clauses in real time. If expressing cause and effect in *unreal* time, you must structure *both* clauses – the causal clause and the effect clause – using the unreal patterns set forth above.⁸

SO HOW DO I FORM THIS STRUCTURE?

**Start the *cause clause* – the *reason why* - with the word IF.
Then, concentrate on the “verb trick” –**

- re-express the verb as a *past* tense action
- *invert* the “truth value” (the “reality”) of the action
 - o if the action is affirmative in “real” time – invert it to negative
 - o if the action is negative in “real” time – make it affirmative

Use WOULD⁹ with the resulting action.

For example: Paul doesn’t work hard because he doesn’t like his job.

- (1) What is the *cause clause*?
- (2) The one that explains the reason why Paul doesn’t work hard.

Start this clause with the word IF:

- **IF Paul liked his job**

Note we have taken **two** tricky grammatical steps here:

- i. We have **changed the tense** of the action **from** present tense (“doesn’t like”) to past tense (liked).
- ii. We have **changed the “reality”**¹⁰ of the action from negative (“does not like”) to affirmative (liked).

⁸ If you speak a Western language, most of this is quite obvious. The underlying principal is certainly obvious. If you do not speak a Western language, however, you may find this entire concept very difficult. Therefore, study this information so that you can *learn* and *understand* what native speakers are *saying*. There is *no need* to use this structure yourself. At the end of this unit, I have included a full-page of alternative expressions you can use to express cause and effect. Because we cannot control what native speakers will say to us, second-language learners always need at least *passive* knowledge of how to structure ideas, and what that structure seeks to convey. Native speakers use unreal conditions very frequently.

⁹ Or sometimes, could.

- If she **didn't need** more skills, she **wouldn't study**.

Example #2

The District Attorney doesn't have enough evidence, so he can't indict them.

↓
NEGATIVE

↓
NEGATIVE

- (1) **invert** the reality of the actions: (here, make them **affirmative**)

Doesn't have ¹⁵	has
Can't indict ¹⁶	Can indict

- (2) **change** the verb tense:

- **cause:** **if + past tense**
If the State's Attorney **had**
- **effect:** **would + simple verb**
he **could** (indict) – **would be able to** indict

Why can't the District Attorney indict them?

- **Because** he doesn't have enough evidence.
- **If** he **had** the evidence, he **could indict** them.

¹⁵ real cause

¹⁶ real effect

SUMMARY

The present unreal condition uses *two* clauses.

Each clause contains its own subject and its own verb.

The two types of clauses are the **cause** clause and the **effect** clause.

- Use the **cause** clause to state the reason.
- Use the **effect** clause to state the resulting action.
 - This action *results from* the action stated in the cause clause.
 - The action in the cause clause is the *reason behind* the circumstances described in the effect clause.

• CAUSE CLAUSE

If	+ subject	+ past-tense verb
If	Annie	didn't need
If	the District Attorney	had

IF is the **key word** in the “cause clause” and presents the **condition** linked to the resulting action.

• EFFECT CLAUSE

subject	would	simple verb
she	would not	study
he	would [indict

WOULD is the **key word** in the “effect clause”.¹⁷

When the subject is a *pronoun*, native speakers normally shorten *would* to 'd.

If I had time, **I'd** go.

If the D.A. had the evidence, **he'd** indict.

¹⁷ It shows that the (resulting) action is only **hypothetical** (contingent; conjectural; not factually real).

Note:

The clause *order* is not important in these constructions.
The following *pairs* of sentences mean the exact same thing:

I'd go if I had time.
If I had time, I'd go.

She wouldn't study if she didn't need to.
If she didn't need to study, she wouldn't.

If my dad were ¹⁸ home, he'd drive us.
My dad would drive us if he were home.

If I were young again, I would study computers.
I would study computers if I were young again.

RULE: The verb **BE** has only one form in the present unreal verb system: **were**.

If I were...

If you were ...

If she were ...

If he were ...

If it were ...

If we were ...

If they were ...

For example:

If I were American, I would never live in Chicago. I would live in California.

If it weren't so late, I would go out for a drink. It's just too late now, and I'm tired.

¹⁸ Many native speakers say "If my dad was home ... " This is actually a typical "native error." That is because the verb "BE" has some exceptions. Don't worry about the exception. Try to learn the rule. If you say "was," that's alright!!

Colloquial / Conversational Usage

In conversation, native speakers will frequently construct the unreal condition as follows:

I don't have time. If I did, I'd go.

Use the following pattern to form this construction :

- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| 1. State the <i>cause</i> in the real verb system.⇒ | I don't have time. |
| 2. Re-state the cause in the unreal system, using the AUXILIARY ONLY . | ⇒ If I did, |
| 3. State the <i>effect</i> in the unreal system. | ⇒ I'd go. |

Examples:

She doesn't know her neighbors. If she did, she'd invite them to her party.

He understands their dilemma. If he didn't, he'd probably fire them.

There's no basketball game this weekend. If there were, I'd go.

He's out of town this week. If he weren't, I'd ask him to join us.

They have to save their money this year. If they didn't, they'd take a cruise to the Bahamas.

I can't understand these questions. If I could, I would try to answer them.

They can pick us up at the airport. If they couldn't, we'd have to take a cab.

Practice your own sentence /situation:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. State the <i>cause</i> in the real verb system.⇒ | |
| 2. Re-state the cause in the unreal system, using the AUXILIARY ONLY . | ⇒ |
| 3. State the <i>effect</i> in the unreal system. | ⇒ |

FUNCTION of the **Past Unreal Condition**

The past unreal condition has the **exact same functions** as the present unreal condition.

- It expresses **cause** and **effect**
- It answers the question **why?**

The **only difference** between the past and present unreal conditions is **time**.

Example:

I didn't attend the conference because I was working on an important case.

I was working on an important case If I hadn't been working on an important case	real cause unreal cause
I didn't attend the conference I would have attended it	real effect unreal effect

Why didn't you attend the conference?

I would have attended it if I hadn't been working on an important case.
 If I hadn't been working on an important case, I would have attended the conference.

Why did Patricia turn down the job offer?

If the job hadn't involved so much traveling, she wouldn't have turned it down.¹⁹
 She wouldn't have turned the job down if it hadn't involved so much traveling.

If the job hadn't involved so much traveling, she would have accepted the offer.
 She would have taken the job if it hadn't required so much travelling.

The above explanations tell the listener that Patricia was probably interested in the job offer.

- She did not turn it down because it did not pay enough money or because she thought it was a boring job, or too difficult.
- She had one reason: she did not want to travel all the time for work.

¹⁹ “**Turn down**” is a phrasal verb meaning “reject.” It is frequently used with **offers** and **suggestions**. “Reject” an offer, or “reject” a suggestion can often be too strong for the situation. “Turn it down” is always acceptable, whether in business or the law. For example: “A private law firm in Beijing made me an offer to work in their patent group. I **turned it down**, however, because I really like my job at the SIPO.”

Conversational / Colloquial Forms of the Past Unreal Condition

Use the same pattern as the present unreal condition when expressing cause and effect in casual conversation.

- (1) State the reason in “real” time.
- (2) Re-state the reason in “unreal” time, using the auxiliary only.
- (3) State the full effect, using the “unreal” effect construction.

For example:

Why didn't you file a claim against them?

- (1) We didn't have enough evidence.
- (2) If we had had it,
- (3) we would have filed (a claim).

Why didn't you attend the conference?

My client needed me. If he hadn't, I would have attended the conference.

Further examples:

- They weren't in the office on Tuesday. If they had been, they'd have met the new boss.
- We couldn't afford the tickets. If we could have, we'd have gone to the concert last Saturday.
- Our only witness was a gang member. If he hadn't been, we'd have put him on the stand.²³

²³ “To **put someone on the stand**” means to call a witness to testify. In this instance, the reason why the lawyers didn't call this witness to testify is because he lacked credibility, and the jury wouldn't believe his testimony. *Note* that this is only an example, for legal purposes. This does *not* mean that gang members are *never* called to testify in criminal cases.

In terms of **language**, lawyers “*put witnesses on the stand*” and parties or witnesses “*take the stand*.”

Judges, however, are **not** *on the stand*. Judges sit “*on the bench*.” Lawyers “*approach the stand*” to question parties and witnesses. Lawyers “*approach the bench*” to talk to the judge.

EXPRESSING CAUSE AND EFFECT IN ENGLISH – VARIOUS STRUCTURES

The following are the most common ways to express cause and effect.

- ❑ When *speaking* or *writing*, you do not need to use the unreal form.
- ❑ When *listening* or *reading*, however, you will need to understand it. ²⁴

I didn't know all the relevant information, (cause)
so I didn't finish the report. (effect)

I didn't finish the report (effect)
because I didn't know all the relevant information. (cause)

I didn't know all the relevant information; (cause)
therefore, I didn't finish the report. (effect)

I didn't know all the relevant information. (cause)
That's why I didn't finish the report. (effect)

I didn't know all the relevant information. (cause)
Otherwise, I would have finished the report. (effect)

If I had known all the relevant information, (cause)
I would have finished the report. (effect)

I would have finished the report (effect)
if I had known all the relevant information. (cause)

²⁴ Be advised that unless a native speaker is a professional linguist, he/she will have no idea of what "unreal conditions" are. Natives simply use them. This includes lawyers and judges. They simply use them.

OFFERING ADVICE

Native English speakers frequently use the “unreal condition structure” to offer advice. This usage is a grammatical alternative to “should.” Therefore, it is not binding.

Example #1

You should call him back. (situation)

If I were you, I'd call him back.

Example #2

John shouldn't turn down that offer.

If I were John, I wouldn't turn down that offer.

Example #3

They should have sued for infringement.

If I were them, I would have sued for infringement.

FORM

If I were is the advice form. It replaces should.

The **person** to whom the advice is offered **follows** (and completes) the fixed advice form:

- If I were **you**
- If I were **John**
- If I were **them**

Express the **advised action** in the second clause. Use:

- **would** + simple verb
- **would have** + past participle

to express the **advised** action.

- I **would call** him back.
- I **wouldn't turn** that offer **down**.
- I **would have sued** for infringement.

Note two important points if you want to use this structure yourself:

- **If I were** replaces **should**. It does not *explain*. Therefore, you do not use this form in a wide variety of patterns.
- **If I were** “expresses” or “conveys” the advice. As explained above, it replaces “should.” Therefore, do not use “should” in the main clause. You do not need to give the advice twice. Use *would* to express the advised action /advised conduct.

Incorrect - If I were the jury, I should find for plaintiff.

Correct - **If I were the jury, I would find for plaintiff.**

Further Examples

You should make a decision. – or -
If I were you, I would make a decision.

Bill shouldn't take things so personally.
If I were Bill, I wouldn't take things so personally.

You should have made a decision.
If I were you, I would have made a decision.

Bill shouldn't have taken things so personally.
If I were Bill, I wouldn't have taken things so personally.

They should have moved for summary judgment.
If I were representing that case (If I were them), I would have moved for summary judgment.

He should have dropped the charges. His attorneys told him he couldn't win.
If I were him, I'd have dropped the charges.²⁵ His attorneys told him he couldn't win.

²⁵ **Note** – do **not** say : “If I had been him, I would have dropped the charges.”

Why not ? Because this is **not** the unreal condition function – we are not linking cause and effect here.

- This is the advice function.
- “**If I were**” is the fixed advice form.

To demonstrate that the advised action is in the past – use *would have* (+ action).

Following are some *examples* of how to use and alternate these expressions in fluent conversation.

To tell one of your crazy American friends not to be such a workaholic, say:

You shouldn't work all the time!

If I were you, I wouldn't work all the time. **I'd relax** a little, too!

To tell another friend – regardless of nationality – that the bar is difficult, and it would be a good idea to spend more time studying for it, say:

You should probably take the bar a little more seriously.

If I were you, I'd study more than you are right now. **I'd put in 8 to 10 hours** a day, at a minimum.

* * * * *

Exercises begin on the following page.

If you look again at the first page of this exercise sheet, you will note that this *form* of language has two *functions*. The first one described was the *function* of explaining. The second one described is the *function* of giving advice. Both these functions use the same *form* – but you must look closely at *meaning* as well.

Do not be discouraged. This is *very* advanced English. I offer it to help you know what people are saying to you. As a non-native speaker, it may be a **good idea** to use a simpler structure in your response. Most native speakers you will meet are not English teachers!! They will look for *your message*, not your verb structures. By using a simpler structure in your own speech (until you are confident), everyone has a meaningful conversation.

USING UNREAL CONDITIONS EXERCISES

Directions :

- (a) Express the following situations (**causal relationships**) using unreal conditions.
(b) In line **b**, re-express the situations using the colloquial, conversation form.

Example:

I won't be there because I have another appointment.

- a. **If I didn't have another appointment, I would be there.**
b. **I have another appointment. If I didn't, I'd be there.**

1. We're not going because we are too busy at work.

a.

b. We are very busy at work. If we weren't, _____.

2. They aren't driving us because their car is in the shop.

a.

b. Their car is in the shop. If _____, _____.

3. He won't consider a transfer because his elderly parents live here.

a.

b. His elderly parents live here.

4. She works weekends because she has to.

a.

b.

5. The only reason he is studying English is because he wants a better job.

a.

b.

6. We do that because he's our top client.²⁶

a.

b.

7. He isn't worried because he has a lot of connections.²⁷

a.

b.

²⁶ “*Top*” client is a frequent expression. It means the “*best*” client; the client from whom you make the most money.

²⁷ “*Have a lot of connections*” means to “*know many important people,*” or to “*have many important friends and / or family members.*” These connections do not have to be rich or famous people, however. You can easily say: “Mary has a lot of connections at the PTO. Her husband is an examiner there.” Sometimes connections implies corruption. Many times, however, it does not. It depends on the context.

8. He doesn't stick to his diet, so he doesn't lose weight.

a.

b.

9. The only reason I don't speak fluent English is that I have no one to practice with.

a.

b.

10. He doesn't know the legal process, so he can't explain it to the group.

a.

b.

11. We didn't get back to him sooner because he wasn't on E-mail.

a.

b.

12. My caseload was very heavy, so I couldn't take on any new clients.

a.

b.

13. She didn't get off to a good start because she was sick the first week of the course.

a.

b.

14. We told them that only because they insisted upon knowing.

a.

b.

15. I didn't know he was coming because he never got in touch with me. ²⁸

a.

b.

²⁸ "Get in touch with" means to "contact." This can be by any means: telephone, mail, e-mail.

Directions:

Offer the following **advice** using the **fixed form** from the unreal verb system.

Example: They shouldn't spend all their money. They should save some, or invest it.

If I were them, I wouldn't spend all my money. I would save some, or invest it.

16. You shouldn't give up on improving your English. It's a long and tedious process.

17. You should check your messages more often.

18. They should invest in a client-server network.

19. You shouldn't call them back. You should make them call you back.

20. He should have demanded an investigation.

21. She should have appealed that decision.

22. They should have filed a motion to dismiss. The other side had no basis in law or fact.