'IF' SENTENCES AND THE 'UNREAL' PAST

In this section you will find information on sentences containing the word 'if', the use of conditional tenses, and the 'unreal past', that is, when we use a past tense but we are not actually referring to past time.

IF AND THE CONDITIONAL

There are four main types of 'if' sentences in English:

1. The 'zero' conditional, where the tense in both parts of the sentence is the simple present:

'IF' CLAUSE	MAIN CLAUSE
If + Simple Present	Simple Present
If you heat ice	it melts.
If it rains	you get wet.

In these sentences, the time is now or always and the situation is real and possible. They are often used to refer to general truths.

2. The Type 1 conditional, where the tense in the 'if clause is the simple present, and the tense in the main clause is the simple future

'IF' CLAUSE	MAIN CLAUSE
If + Simple Present	Simple Future
If it rains	you will get wet
If you don't hurry	we will miss the train.

In these sentences, the time is the present or future and the situation is real. They refer to a possible condition and its probable result.

3. The Type 2 conditional, where the tense in the 'if' clause is the simple past, and the tense in the main clause is the present conditional:

'IF' CLAUSE	MAIN CLAUSE
If + Simple Past	Present Conditional
If it rained	you would get wet
If you went to bed earlier	you wouldn't be so tired.

In these sentences, the time is now or any time, and the situation is unreal. They are not based on fact, and they refer to an unlikely or hypothetical condition and its probable result.

4. The Type 3 conditional, where the tense in the 'if' clause is the past perfect, and the tense in the main clause is the perfect conditional:

'IF' CLAUSE	MAIN CLAUSE
If + Past Perfect	Perfect Conditional
If it had rained	you would have got wet
If you had worked harder	you would have passed the exam.

In these sentences, the time is past, and the situation is contrary to reality. The facts they are based on are the opposite of what is expressed, and they refer to an unreal past condition and its probable past result.

A further type if 'if' sentence exists, where Type 2 and Type 3 are mixed. The tense in the 'if' clause is the past perfect, and the tense in the main clause is the present conditional:

'IF' CLAUSE	MAIN CLAUSE
If + Past Perfect	Present Conditional
If I had worked harder at school	I would have a better job now.
If we had looked at the map	we wouldn't be lost.

In these sentences, the time is past in the 'if' clause, and present in the main clause. They refer to an unreal past condition and its probable result in the present.