Conditional sentences overview

Most students are familiar with the standard conditional forms in English. There are several alternate forms, too. Before we take a look at alternate conditional forms, let's revise the regular forms.

There are mainly three types of conditional sentences in English.

First conditional

The first conditional is used to talk about real situations. It refers to the present or the future. Here we use a simple present tense in the if-clause and will + infinitive (simple future) in the main clause.

If you eat too much food, you will fall ill.
If you skip breakfast, your grades will suffer.
If you work hard, you will succeed.

Second conditional

The second conditional, too, is used to refer to the present or the future. However, it suggests that the situation is less probable, improbable or imaginary. Here we use a simple past tense in the if-clause and would + infinitive in the main clause.

If you ate too much food, you would fall ill.
Here, although the reference is to the present or the future, the situation is imaginary.

If you skipped breakfast, your grades would suffer.

The third conditional

The third conditional is used to talk about past situations that did not happen. Here we use a past perfect tense in the if-clause and would have + past participle in the main clause.

If she hadn't skipped her breakfast, her grades would have improved. (She skipped her breakfast and consequently her grades failed.)
If he hadn't called me names, I wouldn't have broken his neck. (He called me names, so I broke his neck.)
Notes

Could and might can also be used in the main clauses.

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Exercise

Complete the following sentences.

1. If she .... a little longer, she could meet them. (waited / will wait / had waited)

2. If she recognized us, why .... she say Hi? (doesn't / didn't / hadn't)

3. If you heat ice, it .... (will melt / would melt / would have melted)

4. If they all had voted for me, I .... (will win / would win / would have won)

Answers

1. waited; 2. didn't; 3. will melt; 4. would have won