GRAMMARTOP
ENGLISH GRAMMAR IN PLAIN ENGLISH

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Conditional verbs and expressions: the unreal past

We use the unreal past to talk about **unreal situations**. Even though the conditional verbs or expressions are in the past tense, we use them to talk about situations that did not happen as well as to describe **hypothetical situations** that might exist now or at any time.

We use the unreal past after conditional verbs and expressions like *'if only', 'I wish', 'would rather', 'should(n't) have', 'would love/hate to'*.

(I) wish/if only

We use (**I**) *'wish'* and *'if only'* to express **wishes** and **regrets** about things that may happen in the future or things that may have happened in the past. The tenses used depends on what we are trying to express.

When we use *'wish'* to talk about things we want to be different in the **present**, we use *'wish + **Simple Past**'*.

- *I **wish** I **had** more money. (but I don't)*
- *She **wishes** she **were** famous. (but she's not)*

Note: If the verb in the if-clause is 'to be,' use "**were,**" even if the subject of the clause is a third person singular subject (i.e., he, she, it):

*– If I **were** a rich man, I would make more charitable donations.*
*– If he **were** here right now, he would help us.*

Remember, though, that this exception applies only to **unreal conditionals**.

When we use *'wish'* to talk about situations that happened in the past **that we wish hadn't happened** or **were different**, we use 'wish + **Past Perfect**'.

- *I **wish** I **had known** then what I know now. (but I didn't)*
- *He **wishes** he **had asked** her out before she left. (but he didn't)*

We use '***if only***' for **emphasis**, and it follows the same rules as '**wish**'.

- ***If only** I **didn't have** so much homework to do, I could go with you tonight. (present unreal condition)*
- ***If only** you **had told** me you were coming, I would have made more food. (past unreal condition)*

In this video from Anglopod, you'll find the detailed explanation of these structures with examples:

Would rather/it's time

The expression '***would rather***' is also followed by the unreal past. We use the **past tense** verb to talk about a situation in the present. When we want to talk about something that we would prefer someone else do or a situation that we would prefer go another way, we use '**would rather + [Past Simple](#)**'.

- *I **would rather** you **did** it.*
- *He**'d rather** you **didn't** hunt on his property.*

*We can use the contracted form of **would** i.e., he'd, I'd, she'd, we'd, etc.

We use '***it's time***' similarly. When we want to suggest that it is a good time to do something – either for ourselves or someone else – we use '**it's time + Past Simple'**.

- ***It's time** she **went** home now.*
- ***It's time** you **stopped** that.*

Should/shouldn't have

When we use '***should have'***, it means something that we **wish happened did not happen**. When we use '***shouldn't have'***, it refers to something that didn't happen in the past that we wish did.

We use **should(n't) have + [Past Participle](#)**.

- *You **should have told** us. We were so worried! (but you didn't)*
- *I **shouldn't have done** that. (but I did)*

*We often use '**should/shouldn't have'** in apologies.

Would love/hate to

When we talk about things or situations we want or hate but are unreal or hypothetical, we can use '**would love/hate + _infinitive_** (to + verb)'.

- *We **would love to go** to the party. (but we can't for some reason)*
- *I **would love to visit** Spain.*
- *I **would hate to be** you. (but I am not you)*
- *She **would hate to leave** the party early.*

See also:

Zero and First Conditionals

The Second Conditional

The Third Conditional