

The Second Conditional

Conditionals in English are sentence structures that we use to talk about **results, causes, possibilities or hypothetical situations**. They usually have two parts:

- **Condition (if-clause)** → the situation
- **Result (main clause)** → what happens because of that situation

How do we use and make the Second Conditional in English?

Use: imaginary, hypothetical or unlikely situations now or in the future

Structure:

If + past simple, would + base form

For example:

- If **she had** a car, **she would drive** to work.
(unlikely, but possible)
- If **students used** their phones less in class, **they would learn** more.
(unlikely, but possible)
- If **they invited** us, **we'd go**.^{*}
(unlikely, but possible)
- If **I didn't need** sleep, **I wouldn't** go to bed.^{**}
(imaginary and not possible because everybody needs sleep)
- If **we were** taller, **we would be** able to reach the top shelf.
(imaginary and not possible because we cannot change our height)
- If **humans could fly**, **cities would look** very different.^{***}
(imaginary and not possible because humans cannot fly)

* "Would" becomes "'d" in contractions. E.g. I would → I'd, we would → we'd.

** This is how we use contractions in negative clauses: did not → didn't, would not → wouldn't. It is possible to use the construction "I'd not go" (instead of "I wouldn't go"), but this is not common in modern English.

*** "Humans could fly" is not technically the past simple, but we can use "could" in if-clauses in the second conditional.

You can put the main clause first if you want. We often do this if we want to emphasise the result. When we do this, we do not usually use a comma.

For example:

- **She would drive** to work if **she had** a car.
- **I would work** all night if **I didn't need** sleep.

Were/Was

We often use "**were**" instead of "was" for "I" and "he/she/it" in the second conditional. This is commonly used in formal contexts, but some people use it in everyday speech as well.

For example:

- If **I were** you, I would apologise to George.
- He would travel a lot if **he were** rich.

Other Modal Verbs

Sometimes we can use other **modal verbs** (could, may, might, should) instead of "would".

For example:

- If she had a car, she **could** drive to work. (ability)
- If we moved to the city, we **may** find better jobs. (possibility)
- I **might** succeed if I tried harder. (possibility)
- He **should** improve quickly if he joined the team. (expected result)

Questions

We can use the second conditional in **questions**.

For example:

- If you won the lottery, **what would you do?**
- **Who would you call** if you needed help?

Comparisons

The **first** and **second conditional** can look similar, but they are used for very different kinds of situations. The important difference is how **real or likely** the situation is. We use the **first conditional** to talk about **real, possible situations in the future**. We use the **second conditional** to talk about **imaginary, hypothetical or unlikely situations now or in the future**.

Compare:

First Conditional	If Franks studies, he will pass his exams.	real possibility
Second Conditional	If Frank studied, he would pass his exams.	imaginary or unlikely

The **second** and **third conditional** are both used for unreal situations, but they are used for **different times** and have **different meanings**. We use the **second conditional** to talk about **imaginary or unlikely things in the present and the future**. We use the **third conditional** to talk about **imaginary past situations** (things that did not happen).

Compare:

Second Conditional	If Frank studied, he would pass his exams.	imaginary or unlikely in the present or future
Third Conditional	If Frank had studied, he would have passed his exams.	impossible; imaginary situation in the past

Spanish and Portuguese Translations

En: If Frank studied, he would pass his exams.

Sp: Si Frank estudiara, aprobaría sus exámenes.

Pt: Se Frank estudasse, ele passaria nos exames.