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Second conditional

The second conditional is used for unreal or unlikely situations in the present or future, and for giving advice. The form is if + past simple, then would + base verb: If I had more time, I would learn the piano. The past simple here does not talk about the past. It shows that the situation is imaginary.

What to know

The form

The second conditional has an if clause and a result clause. In the if clause, use the past simple. In the result clause, use would plus the base verb.

- *If I had more free time, I would learn the piano.* · *I would learn the piano if I had more free time.*
- *If the government taxed plastic, people would use less of it.* · *People would use less of it if the government taxed plastic.*

What it means

Use the second conditional when you imagine something that is not true now, or is very unlikely to happen. If you say If I won the lottery, I would travel the world, you do not expect to win. The past simple form is a signal that the situation is imaginary.

- Unreal present: If I lived by the sea, I would swim every day.
- Unlikely future: If more people worked from home, cities would be quieter.
- Advice: If I were you, I would apply for that course.
- Polite requests: It would be great if you could send me the details.

If I were you

With the verb be, formal English uses were for every person in the if clause, including I, he and she: If I were rich, If she were the manager. In everyday speech, many people say If I was, and you will hear it. In IELTS Writing, were is the safer, more formal choice.

Other modals and a useful variation

You can replace would with could or might in the result clause. Could shows ability or possibility: If I had a car, I could visit my family more often. Might shows weaker possibility: If prices fell, more people might buy electric vehicles.

Questions

To ask about an imaginary situation, put would before the subject in the main clause: What would you do if you lost your job? Would you move abroad if you had the chance? The if clause stays in the past simple.

Exercises

1. If I _____ more free time, I would learn the piano.
a. have

b. had

c. would have

2. If cities banned cars, the air _____ cleaner.

a. would be

b. will be

c. is

3. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) If I (2) will win (3) the lottery, (4) I would travel.

4. Begin with If. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): study abroad. / I would / will / If I / you, / were

5. Correct this: *If I would have more money, I would buy a house.*

6. What would you do if you _____ a million pounds?

a. win

b. won

c. would win

7. If I _____ you, I would take that job.

a. were

b. will be

c. am

8. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) If governments (2) taxed plastic, (3) people would (4) uses less of it.

9. She would speak better English if she _____ more often.

a. practises

b. would practise

c. practised

10. If the weather _____ better, we would have a picnic.

a. were

b. is going to be

c. will be

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/second-conditional/practice/

IELTS tip. In Speaking Part 3, a second conditional answer sounds natural and shows range: If the government built more cycle lanes, more people would cycle to work. In Writing Task 2, use one in a solution paragraph, and use were rather than was after if.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Second conditional

AIM	Learners form the second conditional accurately and use it for unreal situations, advice and Part 3 answers.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Ask What would you do if you won a million pounds? Write three answers on the board and ask learners to underline the verbs.

Lesson steps

1. Highlight past simple in the if clause and would plus verb in the result. Ask learners why the past form is used for a present idea.
2. Drill the fixed phrase If I were you, with a set of problem cards (I am always tired, I can't find a job). Learners give advice.
3. Pairs ask each other What would happen if... questions about cities, schools and technology and answer with a reason.
4. Mix in six first-conditional sentences and ask learners to sort real possibilities from unreal ones.

Extension

Learners write a Task 2 solution paragraph using one second conditional and one first conditional, and explain why each tense is used.

Answer key

1. b) had. The if clause of the second conditional uses the past simple.
2. a) would be. The result clause uses would plus the base verb.
3. Part 2: *will win* → **won**. An unreal situation uses the past simple in the if clause, not will.
4. If I were you, I would study abroad. If I were you is the fixed phrase for advice, followed by would plus the base verb.
5. If I had more money, I would buy a house. Would never goes in the if clause. Use the past simple: had.
6. b) won. The if clause of an unreal question uses the past simple.
7. a) were. Giving advice with If I were you uses were.
8. Part 4: *uses less of it*. → **use less of it**. After would, use the base form of the verb with no ending.
9. c) practised. The if clause uses the past simple, and British English spells the verb practise with an s.

10. a) were. An unreal condition needs the past form: were. Will is not used in the if clause.

Questions learners often ask

Why do we use the past simple in a second conditional? The past form is a signal that the situation is not real or not likely. It does not refer to past time.

Should I say If I was or If I were? Were is the formal choice and is best in IELTS Writing. If I was is common in everyday speech.

What is the difference between the first and second conditional? The first conditional is for real or likely future situations, and the second is for unreal or unlikely ones. Compare If I get a car and If I had a car.

Can I use could instead of would? Yes. Could shows ability or possibility, and might shows a weaker possibility.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Murphy, R. (2019). English Grammar in Use (5th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

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