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Third conditional

The third conditional is used to talk about an imaginary past: something that did not happen, and what would have happened if it had. The form is if + past perfect, then would have + past participle: If I had studied harder, I would have passed.

What to know

The form

The third conditional has two clauses. In the if clause, use the past perfect: had plus the past participle. In the main clause, use would have plus the past participle.

- *If I had left earlier, I would have caught the train. · I would have caught the train if I had left earlier.*
- *If they had checked the forecast, they would not have cancelled the trip. · They would not have cancelled the trip if they had checked the forecast.*

What it means

The third conditional is about the past, and about a past that did not happen. When you say If I had studied harder, I would have passed, you are saying that you did not study hard enough and you did not pass. You are imagining a different past.

- Regret: If I had saved more money, I would have bought a flat.
- Criticism: If the company had listened to its customers, it would not have lost so many sales.
- Explaining effects: If the dam had not been built, the valley would have flooded.

Modals other than would

You can use other modal verbs in the main clause instead of would. Could have shows possibility: If we had left earlier, we could have avoided the traffic. Might have shows a weaker possibility: If she had taken the course, she might have found a better job.

Third or second conditional?

The second conditional is about an imagined present or future, and the third conditional is about an imagined past. If I had more time, I would learn the piano is a wish about now. If I had had more time last year, I would have learned the piano is about a past that did not happen.

Questions and negatives

For a question, put would before the subject in the main clause: Would more students have passed if the course had been shorter? Or put the if clause first: If the course had been shorter, would more students have passed?

Exercises

1. If I _____ harder, I would have passed the test.
 - a. studied
 - b. had studied

c. would study

2. If she had left earlier yesterday, she _____ the train.

a. would have caught

b. would catch

c. had caught

3. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) If we (2) would have known (3) about the traffic, (4) we would have taken the train.

4. Begin with If. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): have got lost. / he would not / would have checked / If he / the map, / had checked

5. Correct this: *If I had known, I would told you.*

6. She regrets not studying abroad. She says: If I _____ abroad, my English would have improved.

a. studied

b. had studied

c. have studied

7. If they _____ the warning, the flood would not have caused so much damage.

a. had listened to

b. would listen to

c. listened to

8. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) If the factory (2) had not received (3) any help, (4) it would closed.

9. If I _____ about the strike, I would have booked a different airline.

a. have known

b. would have known

c. had known

10. Correct this: *If you had asked, I will have helped.*

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

IELTS tip. In Speaking Part 3, the third conditional lets you discuss how past decisions changed things, such as If governments had invested in public transport earlier, cities would have had less traffic. In Writing Task 2, use it sparingly and correctly, since a single accurate example shows range.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Third conditional

AIM	Learners form the third conditional accurately and use it for regret, criticism and past cause and effect.
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

Tell a short true story about a missed train and ask 'What would have happened if I had left earlier?' Write the learners' answers on the board.

Lesson steps

1. Highlight *had plus participle* in the *if* clause and *would have plus participle* in the result. Mark the false start *If I would have*.
2. Drill chunks with a prompt: *I missed the bus, so I was late*. Learners say: *If I hadn't missed the bus, I wouldn't have been late*.
3. Pairs write six sentences about historical or city decisions (a bridge, a tax, a school) and read them aloud.
4. Check contractions: write *If I'd known* and ask learners to say which 'd is *had* and which is *would*.

Extension

Learners choose a past decision in their country (a transport or education policy) and write a Task 2 style paragraph with one third conditional.

Answer key

1. b) *had studied*. The *if* clause of the third conditional uses the past perfect.
2. a) *would have caught*. The result clause uses *would have plus the past participle*.
3. Part 2: *would have known* → **had known**. *Would have never* goes in the *if* clause. Use *had plus the past participle*.
4. *If he had checked the map, he would not have got lost*. The *if* clause uses *had checked*, and the result uses *would not have got*.
5. *If I had known, I would have told you*. The result clause needs *would have plus the past participle*.
6. b) *had studied*. The past perfect is needed in the *if* clause of the third conditional.
7. a) *had listened to*. Use *had plus the past participle* in the *if* clause.
8. Part 4: *it would closed*. → **it would have closed**. The result clause needs *would have plus the past participle*.

9. c) had known. Would have is for the result clause. The if clause uses had known.

10. If you had asked, I would have helped. The result in the third conditional uses would have, not will have.

Questions learners often ask

What is the third conditional used for? It is used for imaginary situations in the past, such as regrets, criticism and explaining how things could have been different.

Can I say If I would have known? No. In standard written English, the if clause uses the past perfect: If I had known.

How is it different from the second conditional? The second conditional is about the present or future, and the third is about the past. Compare If I had money (now) and If I had had money (then).

Can I use could or might instead of would? Yes. Could have and might have make the result less certain.

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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