



FREE RESOURCE · GRAMMAR

Zero conditional

The zero conditional is used for facts, rules and results that are always true. The form is if plus the present simple, then the present simple: If you heat ice, it melts. You can usually replace if with when and the meaning stays the same.

What to know

The form

A zero conditional sentence has two parts. The if clause gives a condition. The main clause gives the result. Both parts use the present simple.

- *If you heat ice, it melts.* · *Ice melts if you heat it.*
- *If traffic increases, air quality gets worse.* · *Air quality gets worse if traffic increases.*

When to use it

Use the zero conditional when the result always follows the condition. It is the conditional of facts, rules and habits. It does not talk about one future event. It talks about what is generally true.

- Scientific facts: If you cool water to zero degrees Celsius, it turns to ice.
- General truths: If people lack exercise, their health usually gets worse.
- Habits: If I do not understand a word, I look it up.
- Instructions: If the page does not load, refresh the browser.

If or when?

In a zero conditional, if and when mean almost the same. When people drink too little water, they feel tired is the same idea as If people drink too little water, they feel tired. Use when for something that happens every time, and if for something that happens only in some cases.

Zero or first conditional?

Learners often mix the zero and first conditional. The difference is time. The zero conditional is always true. The first conditional is about one possible future event.

Using it in your own answers

A zero conditional is useful when you want to explain a cause and effect without sounding unsure. In an essay about the environment you might write: If factories release waste into rivers, fish and plants die. This sentence gives the reader a clear link in one line.

Exercises

1. If water _____ to one hundred degrees Celsius, it boils.
 - a. will reach
 - b. reaches
 - c. reached

2. When people _____ enough sleep, they find it hard to concentrate.
 - a. do not get
 - b. will not get
 - c. did not get
3. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) If students (2) will not revise, (3) they usually (4) forget new words.
4. Begin with If. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): gets no light, / it dies. / If / will / a plant
5. Correct this: *If you will mix red and blue, you get purple.*
6. _____ the temperature falls below zero, water turns to ice.
 - a. Unless
 - b. If
 - c. Although
7. If the battery is low, _____ the app on your phone.
 - a. close
 - b. closing
 - c. closed
8. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) When traffic (2) becomes heavy, (3) city air quality (4) got worse.
9. If you _____ vegetables every day, your body usually gets more fibre.
 - a. ate
 - b. will eat
 - c. eat
10. The zero conditional is used for something that is _____.
 - a. always or generally true
 - b. possible tomorrow only
 - c. impossible now

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

IELTS tip. In Writing Task 2, a zero conditional is a clean way to state a general truth about your topic, such as If cities build more cycle lanes, more people cycle. In Speaking Part 3, it lets you give a general answer before you give a personal example.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Zero conditional

AIM	Learners form and use the zero conditional for general truths and instructions, and separate it from the first conditional.
TIME	25 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 learners to complete: If you heat ice, ... and If you do not sleep, ... Write the answers on the board without comment.

Lesson steps

1. Highlight the tenses in the board sentences and elicit the form: if plus present simple, present simple.
2. Run a quick drill: say a condition (cool water below zero) and learners say the whole sentence aloud.
3. Give pairs a set of cards with facts about study, health and technology and ask them to build zero conditionals, then swap the clause order and fix the comma.
4. Mix in six sentences that are first conditional and ask learners to sort them into always true and one future event.

Extension

Learners write four zero conditionals for the introduction to a Task 2 essay about technology in education.

Answer key

1. b) reaches. A general fact needs the present simple in both clauses. Will and the past simple do not fit.
2. a) do not get. The zero conditional uses the present simple in the when or if clause.
3. Part 2: *will not revise*, → **do not revise**,. After if in a zero conditional, use the present simple. Will is never used in the if clause.
4. If a plant gets no light, it dies. The if clause comes first and takes a comma. The result follows in the present simple.
5. If you mix red and blue, you get purple. Remove will. The if clause uses the present simple.
6. b) If. If introduces the condition. Unless would reverse the meaning, and although shows contrast.
7. a) close. An instruction uses the base form of the verb in the main clause.
8. Part 4: *got worse*. → **gets worse**. Both clauses need the present simple for a general truth.

9. c) eat. Use the present simple after if for a general result.
10. a) always or generally true. Zero conditional sentences state facts and general rules. One future event is the first conditional, and unreal situations are the second.

Questions learners often ask

Why is it called the zero conditional? Many course books number the conditionals first, second and third for possible and imaginary situations. General facts do not fit those three, so they are called zero.

Can I use when instead of if? Yes. In a zero conditional, when and if mean almost the same thing. Use when if the situation happens regularly.

Can I use will in the zero conditional? Not in the if clause. If you want to talk about a possible future event, use the first conditional, with will in the main clause.

Do I need a comma? Use a comma after the if clause when it comes first. Do not use one when the main clause comes first.

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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