The second conditional

If I **had** enough money, I'**d** buy that diamond necklace.

Definition

The second conditional refers to events that are not likely to happen in the future <u>or</u> to conditions that are not possible in the present.

Construction

Construction	Time reference	Example
1. 'if' + past, + 'would/could' + bare infinitive	1. future condition + future result	If I **won** the lottery, I **would** buy that car.
	2. present condition + present result	If I **were** rich, I **could** buy that car.
	3. present condition + future result	If I **were** rich, I **would** buy that car.
2. 'if' + 'were to' + infinitive, + would/could + bare infinitive		If I **were to win** the lottery, I **would** buy that car.

Note that

1. **Continuous tenses are also possible.**

   If I weren't working today, I'd be enjoying the sunshine.

2. **As with all conditionals the 'if' clause can come first or second. When it comes first, it is followed by a comma.**

Uses

Second conditional sentences have several uses. Here are some examples:

Use	Examples	
Hypothesis	☒	If I lost my job, it would be hard to find another one. This is a hypothetical situation and the speaker has no reason to be concerned. Contrast this with a first conditional sentence: 'If I lose my job, it will be hard to find another one.' In this case the speaker feels that there is a real risk that he will lose his job.
Contingency	☒	What would you do if you had to choose another career?
Suggesting	☒	I think it would be better if we sent a small sample to the customers.
Advising	☒	If I were you, I'd apply for a promotion.
Criticism	☒	If this were my office, I'd tidy it up.
Polite request	☒	Would it be all right, if I brought a friend with me?

Alternatives to 'if' + past tense

The conditional clause can use 'were' or 'had' as alternatives to an 'if' clause.

Examples

'If' clause	'Were'/'Had' Clause
If the building **fell** down, ...	**Were** the building **to fall down**...
If you **were to win** the lottery, ...	**Were** you **to win** the lottery...
...if it **wasn't raining**.	...**were** it **not raining**
If he **were** her father, ...	**Were** he her father...
If I **had** the time...	**Had** I the time, ...
...if I **hadn't got** a broken arm.	...**had** I **not got** a broken arm.

Choice of modal verb

'Would' is most commonly used in second conditional sentences but 'could' and 'should' are also possible.

'Should' is used as an alternative for 'would' and has no other meaning. The use of 'should' is rather formal. It is more likely to be heard in British than American English.

>   I **should** be delighted if you **came** to my party.

'Could' is used to express ability. It is an alternative to 'would be able to'.

>   I **could** help you mend the fence if I **didn't have** a broken arm.

Further examples

Unlikely future

>   If you **were to win** the lottery, what **would** you **buy** first?
>   If I **left** home, I **could** live with my friends.
>   If I **weren't** so busy at work, I **should have** more time for sport.
>   If I **got** the promotion, I **would give** everyone a pay rise.
>   If you **had to** change jobs, **would** you **like** to be an actor?

Impossible present

>   If I **were** rich, I **would buy** a big house.
>   If I **didn't have** a broken arm, I **would help** you.
>   If you **were** the boss, how **would** you **do** it?
>   If it **were raining**, we **couldn't have** this party outside.
>   If I **had** better qualifications, I **could apply** for the promotion.

Formality

Whilst it is considered grammatically correct to use 'were' for all forms of 'be' in conditional sentences, in spoken English you will often hear 'was' for I, he, she and it.

> **If I was rich, I would buy a boat.**
> **If he wasn't so busy, he could have a holiday.**
> **We'd go to the park, if it wasn't raining.**

In written English and certainly for any test situation, use 'were' for all forms of 'be'

Example

Susan: What would you do if you won the lottery?

Patty: I'd give up work, buy a boat, hire a crew and travel round the world; there are so many places I'd love to see.

Paige: Would you? I wouldn't. With some capital, I'd leave my job and open my own studio - imagine being able to do something you love all day.

Susan: Yes, that'd be great. How about you, Jane?

Jane: Oh, I don't know. I'd certainly get a bigger house and a car, have holidays on Patty's boat...

Paige: Yes, Patty, could we come and visit you on your boat?

Patty: Yes, yes, you could all come; my boat would be the biggest you've ever seen. And you Susan, what would you do?

Susan: Not too keen on a boat - I get sea sick. I'd fly to the nearest port to visit you

though. But what I'd really love to do is...