

Third conditional

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Introduction



If I **had taken** an earlier train, I **would not have been** late for my meeting.

Definition

The third conditional refers to hypothetical events in the past. The condition is impossible to fulfil or the speaker does not know if it was fulfilled.

Construction

If + past perfect (simple or continuous) + past perfect modal + past participle

The 'if' clause and the main clause can be either positive or negative.

As with all conditionals, either clause can come first. When the 'if' clause is first, it is followed by a comma.

Alternatives to 'if'

Using **inversion**, the conditional clause may begin with 'had' or 'were' rather than 'if'. For example:

If clause

Were/Had Clause

If I hadn't seen George...
If she'd studied harder...
If they'd known about it...

Had I not seen George...
Had she studied harder...
Had they known about it...

If they were here...
If it were possible, I'd...
If we were asked to participate...

Were they here...
Were it possible, I'd...
Were we asked to participate...

Note that although 'had' clauses are fairly common in conversation, 'were' clauses are less so.

Choice of modal verb

As well as 'would', other modals are possible.

'Might' in the main clause expresses a possibility.

If you **hadn't warned** me, I **might have made** a terrible mistake,

'Could' refers to ability.

If our supplier **had delivered** on time, we **could have met** our deadline.

'Should' refers to probability or the right thing.

If he'd **had** all the information, he **should have written** the report.

We don't know if he had the information or not or if the report has been written. Writing the report would have been the right thing for him to do given all the information.

Unknown events

We don't always know if something happened or not:

John was late for the meeting but we didn't know what time he'd left home. If he'd **left** home on time, he **should have arrived** by the start of the meeting.

Last week I went on a data analysis course and a lot of people found the mathematical explanations difficult to follow. If you **hadn't had** a mathematical background you'd **have found** the explanations really difficult to follow.

Would John **have gone** to the party if he'd **thought** that Judy would be there?

The above sentence does not give us enough information to know who was at the party. There are several possibilities:

- John went to the party and Judy didn't.
- John didn't go to the party and neither did Judy.
- John didn't go to the party and Judy did.
- John didn't know whether Judy would be there or not.
- We don't know if John would have preferred Judy to be there or not.

Compare with these where it's clear what did and didn't happen:

Had I not gone to Paris, I **wouldn't have met** the woman I later married.

Do you think that you **would have had** the accident if you **hadn't been** in such a hurry?



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