

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

Construction	Time reference	Example
If + past perfect, +modal* + 'have' + past participle * see note below	past condition +past result	If the sun had shone , people would have been happier.

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

Uses and examples

Use	Examples
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Blame



I **wouldn't have crashed** the car if it **hadn't been snowing**.

Criticism and praise



If the team **hadn't worked** so well together, we **wouldn't have met** the deadline.

Regret



My first job was so boring. If I'd **studied** harder at college, I'd **have had** a more interesting one.

Thanks



Hey - thanks for mentioning the sales. If you **hadn't told** me, I'd **never have found** all these great bargains.

Deduction and reasoning



If he **had gone** on holiday, he **would have taken** his suitcase. But his suitcase is there on top of the wardrobe so he can't have gone, can he?

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...	Had I not seen George...
If she'd studied harder...	Had she studied harder...
If they'd known about it...	Had they known about it...
If they were here...	Were they here...
If it were possible, I'd...	Were it possible, I'd...
If we were asked to participate...	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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