The subjunctive



It's essential that everyone be at the meeting tomorrow.

Definition

The subjunctive is a verb form that can be used as an alternative to some present and past tenses.

Construction

For present tenses, it is the bare infinitive.

For past tenses, it is also the bare infinitive except for the verb 'to be', which uses were.

It is always the same form for I, you, he, they etc.

'to be' present	'to be' past	Other verbs present and past
I be you be he be she be it be we be they be	I were you were he were she were it were we were they were	I go you go he go she go it go we go they go

Uses

The subjunctive is used after certain verbs and expressions to emphasise importance. For example:

Verbs	Expressions
to advise (that)	It's best (that)
to ask (that)	It's crucial (that)
to request (that)	It's essential (that)
to demand (that)	It's imperative (that)
to insist (that)	It's vital (that)
to propose (that)	It's important (that)
to suggest (that)	It's recommended (that)
to recommend (that)	It's a good/bad idea (that)
to urge (that)	On condition that
	My advice is that
	His wish is that

Examples

Affirmative

She insists that her son be home by 11pm.
It was imperative that he be on time for the meeting.
It's recommended that he take two tablets a day.
The manager requested that his staff arrive early the next morning.
It was recommended that all visitors wear protective clothing.
It's vital that you be available to work at weekends in this job.

Note that the difference is not always noticeable. For I, you, we and they, the subjunctive is the same as the indicative:

It is important that you practise English often.
It is important that he/she practise English often.

Past tenses

Note that in the above examples which are in the past tense, we do not use 'were'. This is used in a different way - see below.

Negative

The manager insisted that we not be late for the meeting.
It is imperative that employees not make personal phone calls during working hours.
The government has recommended that tourists not visit the country until it is safe to do so.

Continuous tenses

It's essential that a car be waiting for him at the airport.
It's important that teams be working on the production line around the clock.

Passive

It's vital that two new secretaries be employed immediately.
I demanded that I be allowed to attend the meeting.

Should

We sometimes add should to subjunctive sentences, especially after the verbs 'suggest', 'recommend' and 'insist'.

Her boss recommended that she should attend a training course.
He insisted that she shouldn't wait for him.
They suggested that the meeting shouldn't be held on Friday.

Formal English

The subjunctive is more common in spoken American English than in spoken British English but is used in formal British English. For many of the above examples, there are less formal, indicative sentences with the same meaning.

She insists that her son is home by 11pm.
The manager insisted we weren't late for the meeting.
It is imperative that employees don't make personal phone calls during working hours.
It's essential that a car is waiting for him at the airport.
It's vital that two new secretaries are employed immediately.

Wishes

We sometimes use the subjunctive to talk about what we want to happen; what we hope will happen or what we imagine happening, especially with 'if', 'as if', 'wish' or 'suppose'. This is when we use were as the past form of 'to be' although it is also possible in informal, conversational English, to use was.

Formal	Informal
If I were you, I'd look for a new job. She behaves as if she were the boss. I wish it were Friday. Suppose he were rich, would you marry him?	If I was you... She behaves as if she was... I wish it was... Suppose he was rich... Note that although you may hear British people using this form, it is better for non-native speakers not to use it.

Standard expressions

Certain fixed expressions use the subjunctive. For example:

Long live the Queen/President!
God bless you.
Heaven forbid! [when you really hope that something doesn't happen]
Heaven help us!
Be that as it may, I still want you to finish the job by Friday. [That may be true or not but...]
We're all in the same boat, as it were. [...in a way, so to speak.]
Come what may, I'll continue to support you. [Whatever happens...]
Far be it from me to disagree/criticise etc... [a polite introduction to a negative comment]
If need be, I'll come with you. [If it's necessary...]
Perish the thought! [a reaction to an unpleasant or ridiculous suggestion or possibility]
So be it. [It can't be changed so we have to accept the situation.]
Suffice (it) to say,.. [an introduction to a short explanation or summary - It is enough to say that...]

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