

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 <u>not to use it</u>. |

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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