

SECTION I

Subjunctives and Unreal Past

1 PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE

Present subjunctive (see Overview) is common in formal British English. In less formal English, we use a Present tense form (but not if the rest of the sentence is in the past), and we can also use *should*. (The examples below give alternative forms.)

We use Present subjunctive:

- in *that*-clauses after report verbs, adjectives or nouns to express plans, urgency, intentions or suggestions:
The police insisted the car (should) be moved immediately. The police insist the car is / be moved immediately.
- Words often followed by a Present subjunctive are:
Verbs: insist, suggest, request, order, recommend, propose, think
Adjectives: advisable, essential, desirable, preferable
Nouns: decision, insistence, demand, requirement, condition
- after *if*: *If he (should) be found / is found guilty, he'll be jailed for ten years.*
- after *whether*: *Whether she (should) agree / agrees or not, we're going to have to go ahead.*
- after *whatever*: *Whatever his reasons be / are, they are insufficient to excuse him.*
- The Present subjunctive is common in particular phrases:
Far be it from me... So be it. Be that as it may... Suffice it to say... Come what may... Heaven forbid! Long live the Queen.

2 PAST SUBJUNCTIVE

We use the Past subjunctive (*were* in all persons) in formal English:

- If the minister were here, he would no doubt refute the allegations. (= formal)*
- However, it's more common to use *was* and *were* in their usual ways:
I wish he wasn't such a big-head. (= informal)
- Were* is more common only in the phrase *if I were you*, and for all persons in the pattern *were* + subject + infinitive:
I wouldn't argue with her if I were you. Were the vote to go against me, I'd resign.

3 UNREAL PAST

We use Unreal Past (including Past Perfect) to discuss imaginary situations, to express impossible wishes, and to make proposals and polite requests. We can also use Past subjunctive:

- after *if* when we think it is unlikely or impossible that the condition will be fulfilled:
If she were to eat / ate fish more often, she might get to like it.
- to replace an *if*-clause when we imagine past, present or future events being different:
Had he agreed, he'd have become the team captain. Were he to agree, he'd probably become the next coach.
- after *if only* to express regrets and frustration:
If only he were / was more adventurous. If only I hadn't drunk so much coffee! (= but I did)
- after *wish* when we are wishing for the virtually impossible. For more reasonable wishes, we commonly use *would* or *could*:
I wish I weren't / wasn't having the injection tomorrow. (= but I am) I wish I'd listened to you. (= but I didn't) I wish you wouldn't shout all the time.
- after *would rather* and *would sooner* to express preferences:
Do you mean you'd sooner I weren't / wasn't here? I'd rather you hadn't spoken so rudely to him.
- After *as if* and *as though* we use Present and Present Perfect forms to suggest something is likely to be true. Past forms suggest it is unlikely or untrue:
The man speaks as if he has / had never heard of the place. He acts as though he owns / owned the place.
- after imperative *suppose* and *imagine* (Present tense is also possible):
Imagine he were to tell you / told you / tells you his most personal secrets. Suppose she were to have followed / had followed your advice. (= but she didn't)
- after *it's time*...:
*It's time I wasn't here. (Past subjunctive is not possible)
It's time we left. / It's time to leave.*

? check

Which sentence does not contain a Present or Past subjunctive, or Unreal Past tense?

- I propose that this street be closed to cars.
- If I was in his shoes, I'd give up.
- I'm suggesting that he reconsider my proposals.
- Imagine you are going to fall asleep.
- You talk as if you really meant it.