SECTION 2

Likely conditionals in the past, present and future

1 VERB FORMS IN THE *IF*-CLAUSE

Present or future

To talk about conditions in the present or future that we think are likely to happen, we use Present tenses or modals. This is the most common form of conditional sentence:

> If he **comes** into the room, don't mention the party this evening.   'Can I leave early today?' 'If you **must**.'

- To talk about the future, we can also use *going to* in the *if*-clause.
> Even if we're **not going to go** swimming, we'd still better take a towel.

- *Can* for ability is also common in *if*-clauses:
> Assuming you **can leave** work early, we'll be able to make the 6.30 performance.

Past

To talk about events in the past, we can use Present Perfect or Past Simple / Continuous. This suggests that either we are not sure if something happened, or we are assuming it did and want to draw a conclusion from it (see Overview for false conditionals, and see Section 4 for unlikely conditionals in the past):

> If he's **read** that report, he'll know what all the fuss is about.
> If you've **been telling** the truth, we need to act quickly.
> Provided that she **caught** her flight, she'll be landing any moment now.

2 *WILL*/*WON'T* IN THE *IF*-CLAUSE

We sometimes use *will* and *won't* in the *if*-clause with the meanings of refusal (*won't*), polite request (*will*), or strong disapproval at someone's insistence on doing something (*will*):

> If he **won't** go, there is nothing you can do about it. (= refusal)
> If you'll **hold** this end, I'll take the other one. (= request)
> If you **will** drive so fast, you must expect to have accidents. (= insistence)

watch out!

Apart from the meanings above, we don't normally use *will* in *if*-clauses to indicate the future:

✗ ~~If the weather will be fine tomorrow, we can go for a walk.~~

✓ If the weather **is** fine tomorrow, we can go for a walk.

3 VERB FORMS IN THE MAIN CLAUSE

Verb forms in the main clause follow the normal rules for tense and modal use. Some of the most common are:

Present Simple	to indicate certainty of the result: *If you mix blue and red, you **get** purple.*
will	to predict future events, make promises, etc: *Provided I see him, I'll **tell** him.*
will have	to predict what will have happened: *The train **will have left** if we don't get there soon.*
can	to express ability, permission, etc: *You **can do** it that way if you like, but I wouldn't recommend it.*
going to	for predictions or intentions: *If you do that again, I'm **going to leave**.*

4 MIXING TIME REFERENCES

It is sometimes possible to have an *if*-clause referring to the present or future, and a main clause referring to the past, especially with *must have* and *can't have* for deductions:

> If he's **here** already, he **must have set off** very early.

5 FALSE CONDITIONALS

False conditionals (see Overview) are very common when mixing time references:

> 'I don't eat red meat.' 'Well, if that's a problem we'll **have to find** another restaurant.'

? check

Tick (✓) the sentence that is incorrect.

a   We'd better get ready if he's coming round soon.
b   If I have to, I'm going to tell him what I think of him.
c   If the film will be uninteresting, we can leave before the end.
d   If you don't understand, why didn't you ask me?
e   If you'll just wait a moment, I'll see if he's in.

SECTION 3

Unlikely conditionals in the present and future

1 VERB FORMS IN THE *IF*-CLAUSE

Present

When we talk about unlikely or impossible situations in the present, we use Past subjunctive or Unreal Past (see Sections 1.2 and 1.3) in the *if*-clause to indicate that the opposite is true:

> If I **didn't know** you so well, I'd say you were lying.
> (= but I do know you well)
> If only he **weren't** so stubborn, he'd agree with us.
> (= but he is stubborn)

Future

When talking about the future, we use an Unreal Past tense in the *if*-clause to indicate that we are talking hypothetically and think the condition is unlikely to be fulfilled:

> If you **told** him, he'd never believe you. (= I don't think you will tell him)
> Suppose your car **broke down**, what would you do?

2 VERB FORMS IN THE MAIN CLAUSE

We commonly use *would* and *could* in the main clause when there is an Unreal Past or Past subjunctive in the *if*-clause:

> If I weren't so busy, I'd take a long holiday.
> If you lent me £10, I **could buy** it today.

- We also use *might*:
> She **might stay** longer if you asked her nicely.

3 *WOULD* IN *IF*-CLAUSES

We use *would* and *wouldn't* in *if*-clauses for polite requests and strong wishes that someone would do something:

> If you **would** be kind enough to lend me a hand, we could finish this very quickly.   If you **would** just calm down for a moment, you'd see what I'm talking about.

watch out!

We don't use *would* in *if*-clauses to indicate simple future:

> ✗ ~~I think you'd be mad if you would give up your job.~~
> ✓ I think you'd be mad if you **gave up** your job.

4 *SHOULD* IN *IF*-CLAUSES

We can use *should* in *if*-clauses instead of a Present or Unreal Past. It suggests that the condition is possible but unlikely. We use *will* or *would* or other modals in the main clause:

> If they **should** agree the contract, we'd have to work twice as hard.

- This structure is formal and roughly equivalent to the phrase *by any chance*:
> If **by any chance** they do turn up, we'd better tell them what happened.

- In more formal contexts we can also omit *if* or other conditional words and start the sentence with *Should*:
> **Should** you change your mind, please let me know.

5 *IF ... ARE TO/WERE TO*

We use *be to* in a fairly formal way to express conditions. It suggests that the speaker has no influence over whether the condition will be fulfilled or not. *Are to*, *am to*, and *is to* suggest the condition may be fulfilled. *Were to* (or, informally, *was to*) emphasises that the condition is very unlikely:

> If we **are to** get rid of him, who will tell him?
> Supposing you **were to win** the lottery, how would you spend the money?

- We can omit *if* or other conditional words and start the sentence with *Were*. This is not possible with *are*:
> **Were** we to take on more staff, how could we afford to pay them?

? check

Which of the following sentences refer to conditions in the present (P), and which to the future (F)?

	present	future
a If you asked him nicely, he'd let you have the day off.	☐	☐
b If you were a bit more considerate, you'd offer me a seat.	☐	☐
c Should you change your job, what would you do?	☐	☐
d If I were to say what I really think, I'd upset a lot of people.	☐	☐
e If I thought he was dishonest, I wouldn't have offered him the job.	☐	☐

SECTION 4

Past conditionals

1 VERB FORMS IN THE *IF*-CLAUSE

We use Unreal Past Perfect in the *if*-clause to indicate that we know what happened but are speculating about what would have happened if the opposite had been true. This is sometimes called the 'Third' conditional:

> *If she'd known my number, she would have phoned.*
> (= but she didn't know it)
> *If I hadn't been standing outside the supermarket, we might never have met.*

- We can omit *if* and start with *Had*:
> *Had I believed her for one moment, I wouldn't have refused to help.*

- Occasionally, something that is generally true – although we wish it wasn't – can have results in the past:
> *If I wasn't / weren't such an idiot, I wouldn't have done that.*

If it hadn't been for...

This phrase means 'without her, your, etc. help, interference, etc.'. We can use the phrase *If it weren't / wasn't for...* to refer to the present, though if the time reference is clear, it can occasionally refer to the past:

> *If it wasn't for the parking problem, I'd drive to work.*
> *If it hadn't been for you, we'd never have got there on time.*
> *Had it not been for Wagner, modern classical music would sound very different.*
> *If it wasn't for / hadn't been for those delays on the motorway we'd never have missed the wedding.*

Were

In formal English we can use conditional structures beginning with *Were* + Perfect infinitive:

> *Were you to have stopped and considered, you'd have seen the error of your ways.*

2 VERB FORMS IN THE MAIN CLAUSE

- For Past conditionals that have results in the past, we use modal Perfects (*would / could / might have*, etc.):
> *Had you told me earlier, I could have done something about it.*

- For Past conditionals that have results in the present or future, we use mainly *would*, *could* or *might*:
> *If you'd listened more carefully to his directions, you wouldn't be lost now.*
> *If only I'd entered politics earlier, I could be Prime Minister now.*

- With false conditionals in the past, we use Past tenses in the main clause. We don't use Unreal Past Perfect in the *if*-clause:
> *If you were in the area, why didn't you come and visit?*

3 *WOULD HAVE ... WOULD HAVE*

The use of *would have* in both *if*-clause and main clause is becoming very common in spoken and even written English. It's still considered incorrect by some people:

> *If I'd have known how expensive it was, I wouldn't have gone.*

- It's sometimes difficult to hear Past conditionals spoken at speed because of short forms:
> *I'd've come at once if only you'd've rung me.*

4 PAST CONDITIONALS WITHOUT CONDITIONAL WORDS

We often use a Past conditional structure without using a conventional 'conditional word' like *if* or *unless*:

> *But for your help, we'd never have managed.*
> *We'd have been completely lost without you.*
> *You should have come – you'd have loved it.*
> *The film would have been just as effective in black and white.*

? check

Tick (✓) the sentence that has both an *if*-clause and a main clause which refer to the past.

a   If I wasn't so tired all the time, I wouldn't have made such an elementary mistake.
b   If you had driven faster, we'd be there by now.
c   I'd have rung you if I'd known you were at home.
d   I wouldn't be going to London if you hadn't told me about the exhibition.
e   If you were right about the weather, we're going to get wet.