GRAMMAR · UNIT 79%

Present Unreal Conditional

(2nd Conditional) — the grammar of risk assessment

if + past simple	would + base	could · might
If I were...	real vs unreal	What would happen if...?

Meet Diego Again

Technical director at a industrial technology company

Marketing wants to launch the company's new printer at next month's trade show. Diego knows the product isn't ready — and he has to explain the risk without sounding negative.



The trade show is in four weeks.



The firmware certification isn't finished.



Diego doesn't have enough engineers to finish sooner.

Here are the facts.

Reality — and What Diego Would Like

He can't change the facts today, but he can imagine a different situation

THE FACTS (real · present)

- The firmware isn't certified.
- Diego doesn't have ten engineers.
- The launch date is fixed.

WHAT HE WOULD LIKE

- He would like to launch a finished product.
- He would like a bigger team.
- He would like two more months.

So he imagines a present that isn't real — to test a decision before anyone makes it.

Step 1 — Imagine a Different Present

Past tense, present meaning

'If we had ten engineers, we would finish the certification in time.'

Does Diego have ten engineers?

No. The situation is unreal.

Is he talking about the past?

No. He means now.

So why 'had'?

The past form shows distance from reality.

Step 2 — Imagine the Risk

What would happen if marketing got its way?

If we launched the printer next month, …

1. *…it would fail in our clients' warehouses.*
2. *…our support team would spend months on urgent calls.*
3. *…it would be a brand faux pas — in front of the whole industry.*

Nobody has launched anything. The disaster happens inside the sentence — at zero cost.

The Form

Hypothetical present or future

A: If + past simple, **B:** would (not) + base form.

'If we launched that campaign, it would be a PR faux pas.'

You can change the order: 'It would be a PR faux pas if we launched that campaign.' (no comma)

What would YOU do if you were Diego?

Step 3 — Grade the Result

The modal verb shows how sure you are

WOULD
sure

'It would fail the client's acceptance test.'

COULD
possible

'It could damage our reputation for reliability.'

MIGHT
uncertain

'The client might accept a three-week delay.'

Don't say WOULD when you mean MIGHT — in a risk meeting, the modal is your credibility

Step 4 — WERE, Not WAS

The formal form for all persons

'If I were the CEO, I would wait for the certification.'	**giving your opinion safely**
'If the firmware were ready, we would already be selling.'	**formal and written English**
'If I were you, I would call the client today.'	**the advice formula**

'If I was' is common in speech. 'If I were' is the form for reports, emails and board papers.

Real or Unreal? The Distance Dial

The same risk, two distances

REAL (1st conditional) — you think it is likely

'If we lose the client, we will cut the budget.'

if + present → will + base

UNREAL (2nd conditional) — you think it is hypothetical

'If we lost the client, we would cut the budget.'

if + past → would + base

Your tense tells the room how likely you think the risk is

The One Rule to Remember

WOULD lives in the result clause — never in the IF clause

✘ If we would launch now, it will fail.	✔ **If we launched now, it would fail.**
✘ If I would be the CEO, I would wait.	✔ **If I were the CEO, I would wait.**
✘ If we optimized the funnel, sales will rise.	✔ **If we optimized the funnel, sales would rise.**
✘ I would to delay the launch if I could.	✔ **I would delay the launch if I could.**

Spanish speakers: 'si lanzáramos…' = 'if we launched…' — never 'if we would launch'

Now It's Your Turn!

Read the facts. Imagine a different situation: If..., ... would / could / might ...

1. **You have a lot of work.**
   You can't take a holiday.

2. **You don't have the client's direct number.**
   You can't call him.

3. **You have no free time.**
   You can't go to the gym.

4. **Your team is small.**
   You can't accept the new project.

5. **The budget is fixed.**
   You can't hire another engineer.

6. **Your own real situation this month**
   Your choice — grade it: would, could or might?

Example 1: 'If I didn't have so much work, I would take a holiday.'

What About You?

Which parts of your life or work would you like to change?

Work	**Your team**	**Travel**
Health	**Your English**	**Free time**

What would be different if some of these things changed?

'If I travelled less for work, I would have more time to study English.'

Summary

One frame, three grades, one rule

Form	Meaning	Example
If + past simple, would + base	a sure result of an unreal situation	*If we launched now, it would fail.*
... could + base	a possible result	*It could damage our reputation.*
... might + base	an uncertain result	*The client might accept a delay.*
If I / he / it were...	formal form for all persons	*If I were the CEO, I would wait.*
if we lose → will	real: you think it is likely	*If we lose the client, we'll cut costs.*
if we lost → would	unreal: hypothetical distance	*If we lost the client, we would cut costs.*

WOULD never goes in the IF clause · past form = distance from reality, not past time