
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Zero and first conditionals



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. Welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Neil.

Catherine

And me, Catherine. Hello.

Neil

Now, Catherine, would you like to have some of this delicious chocolate I've got here?

Catherine

Oh Neil, I'd love to but I can't. When I eat chocolate, I get terrible headaches.

Neil

Oh that's bad luck! If I eat a lot of chocolate, I just get fat!

Catherine

Do you? You don't look it, you look thin!

Neil

It's all the cycling you see. I can eat whatever I want because of all the cycling.

Catherine

Lucky you.

Neil

Now, in this programme, we're looking at the zero conditional and the first conditional.

Catherine

We'll be discussing why and when we use them.

Neil

We'll see how to form them...

Catherine

We'll help you decide which one to use in which situation...

Neil

And we'll bring you a quiz at the end of the show.

Catherine

So listen carefully – and take some notes!

Neil

Let's start by looking at the zero conditional. We use it to talk about things which always happen in particular situations.

Catherine

For example, **I always get a headache if I eat chocolate.** We also use the zero conditional to talk about facts and truths. And here's Finn with our first example.

Finn

If you drop an apple, it falls to the ground.

Neil

That's gravity for you! Now, there are two parts to the sentence. The part with **if** plus the **present simple** tells us the situation, and the other part is in the present simple tense, and tells us what happens as a result of the **if** situation. Here's Finn with an example of the **if** situation:

Finn

If you drop an apple...

And I'll say that again: **If you drop an apple...**

Catherine

And the result:

Finn

...it falls to the ground.

Catherine

Once more:

Finn

...it falls to the ground.

Neil

And this result happens every time the situation happens. Isn't that right, Catherine?

Catherine

That's correct Neil. It's a scientific fact – and it was first identified by Isaac Newton, I believe.

Neil

I think you're right! So that's the zero conditional. Let's compare it with an example of the first conditional. Finn.

Finn

If you drop that glass, it'll break.

Catherine

And once again:

Finn

If you drop that glass, it'll break.

Catherine

Now, in this sentence the **if** plus present simple part gives us a possible future situation. The other part is made with **will** plus an **infinitive without 'to'** and it gives us the result of this possible future situation.

Finn

If you drop that glass...

If you drop that glass...

Catherine

And this is only a possible situation.

Finn

...it'll break.

...it'll break.

Catherine

And this is the result of the situation. We use **will** to show we are certain that the glass will break. But it only breaks if we drop the glass.

Neil

When we are less certain of the result we can use **might**, like this:

Finn

If you drop the glass, it **might** break.

Catherine

And once again:

Finn

If you drop the glass, it **might** break.

Neil

It's sometimes difficult to choose between the zero and first conditional. It helps to remember that as well as using the zero conditional for truths, we also use it for general situations. If you're talking about a specific situation, or a one-off situation, the first conditional is probably best. For example, to describe a general situation that is true for everyone, we can use the zero conditional to say:

Finn

If you sit in the sun too long, you get burned.

Catherine

But if your friend is about to go sunbathing, perhaps without any sun cream, you can use the first conditional to talk about that specific situation and its possible result, like this:

Finn

If you sit in the sun too long, you will get burned.

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Catherine

And it's quiz time! Are these sentences grammatically correct, or wrong? Here's the first one: When we're older, we'll go travelling.

Neil

OK, this first conditional sentence is correct.

Catherine

Good. Here's another one: If plants don't get water, they die.

Neil

This sentence is correct too.

Catherine

OK, get ready for the last sentence: If I fail my exams again, I feel terrible.

Neil

And that's wrong. It's a specific situation and it's describing a possibility, not a certainty. So we need the first conditional. Here's the correct sentence:

Finn

If I fail my exams again, I **will** feel terrible.

Catherine

Now, before we go, there's just enough time for a top tip. The first conditional only has one 'will'. So this sentence is wrong:

Finn

If **they will leave** now, they'll be home for lunch.

Neil

You need to use present simple without will in the **if** part. Here's the correct version:

Finn

If **they leave** now, they'll be home for lunch.

Catherine

Thank you Finn. So that's the zero conditional, with the present tense in both parts, for things which always happen.

Neil

And that's the first conditional with **if** plus present simple, together with **will**, plus an infinitive, for possible future situations.

Catherine

There's more about this on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

Both

Bye.