
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

The third conditional



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

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

Catherine

And me, Catherine. Hello.

Neil

And today, we're talking about the third conditional.

Catherine

Yes - we'll be looking at why and when we use it.

Neil

And we'll see how to form it...

Catherine

There'll be at a very helpful pronunciation tip...

Neil

And there'll also be a third conditional quiz at the end of the show!

Catherine

Now, the main use of the third conditional is to talk about imaginary situations in the past. And here's Mike with our first example:

Mike

I was really late for work today. When I got to the station, it turned out the trains were cancelled. **If I had known the trains were cancelled, I would have taken a bus.**

Catherine

And Mike's last sentence is describing an imaginary situation. In reality, Mike was late for work because he didn't know the trains were cancelled, and he didn't take a bus. He uses the third conditional to imagine a different past situation when he says: **If I had known the trains were cancelled, I would have taken a bus.**

Neil

Let's take a closer look. There are two parts to this sentence. One part is made with **if** plus **past perfect**:

Mike

If I had known the trains were cancelled ...

Neil

And the other part is made of **subject** plus **would have** plus a **past participle**.

Mike

... **I would have taken** a bus.

Catherine

And we put the two parts together to talk about an imaginary situation in the past, and its imaginary result.

Neil

You can change the order of the two parts if you like: the meaning stays the same:

Mike

I would have taken a bus **if I had known** the trains were cancelled.

Neil

Let's have some more examples. Listen out for **if** plus **past perfect** with **would have** plus a **past participle**.

Mike

I got two Ds and an F in my exams. **If I had worked harder, I would have got better grades.**

Patty was a great singer when she was younger. **She would have won that TV talent show if she had entered it.**

Catherine

And we can use negatives in either or both parts of the sentence. Here are a couple of examples, with the negative forms **hadn't** and **wouldn't**:

Mike

Abid met his wife at university. They've been married for 3 years now. **If Abid hadn't gone to university, he wouldn't have met his wife.**

I registered my mobile phone on a tracker website. When I lost it, I logged on to the site and they told me where it was. **If I hadn't registered my phone, it would have been lost for ever.**

Catherine

So you can see that the third conditional is very useful to talk about things we're pleased we did, as well as things we wish we'd done differently. So what about you Neil – anything you'd change – or not change – in your past?

Neil

I lived in Canada when I was a child and if I hadn't lived in Canada I wouldn't have got dual citizenship. I'm a citizen of the UK and Canada.

IDENT

6 Minute Grammar from the BBC.

Catherine

And we're talking about third conditionals. And now it's time to talk about pronunciation. We use lots of short forms in third conditionals. And here's Mike again with an example.

Mike

If **I'd** had my camera, **I'd** have taken a photo.

Catherine

So in the **if** part, **I** and **had** are shortened to **I'd**. In the main part, **I** and **would** are shortened to **I'd**, and we also drop the **h** from have. So I would have becomes '**I'd've**'. Let's hear another example:

Mike

If I'd woken up earlier, I wouldn't have missed my flight.

Catherine

So **I had** become **I'd** in the if part and **would not have** becomes '**wouldn't've**' in the main part.

Neil

Now it's time for a quiz! I'm going to say two sentences, and you have to use them to make a third conditional sentence. Here's the first one. Mike forgot Jane's birthday. She was upset.

Catherine

If Mike hadn't forgotten Jane's birthday, she wouldn't have been upset.

Neil

Good. Another one: I ate too much. I feel sick.

Catherine

If I hadn't eaten too much, I wouldn't have felt sick.

Neil

And the last one: I didn't go to the party. I didn't meet Francesca.

Catherine

I would've met Francesca if I'd gone to the party.

Neil

Exactly. And that's the end of the quiz. Well done if you got them all right. And we've just got time for a top tip before we finish. Remember, in standard English, there's only one **would** in a third conditional sentence. We don't use **would** in the **if** part. Here's an example of an incorrect sentence.

Mike

If Tom would have said sorry, Sonia would have forgiven him.

Neil

Here's the correct version:

Mike

If Tom had said sorry, Sonia would have forgiven him.

Neil

Great. So that's the third conditional. It's made of **if** plus the **past perfect** tense, and **would have** plus the past participle. We use it to talk about imaginary situations in the past.

Catherine

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

Both

Bye.