

English grammar

Conditional tense

Present conditional tense

Form

Statement: *I would practise*

Negative: *He would not practise*

Question: *Would you practise?*

Neg. question: *Would she not practise?*

Short forms: *I'd practise, He wouldn't practise, Wouldn't we practise?*

Use

We use the present conditional tense in English to speculate about present or future situations that could theoretically happen. This tense is used when the action is either impossible (unreal) or when we do not think that the action will happen.

He would sign it. (But he can't. It is not possible.)

I would travel by plane. (If I wanted to go on holiday. But I do not want to go.)

In the first person singular and plural **should** instead of **would** is also possible. But it is not very common in modern English.

I should/would be really glad. (If you could help me.) *We should/would send the fax.* (But we do not know how to do it).

Should, however, can also express a recommendation or advice. In this respect, it is similar to *ought to*.

I should study tonight. I ought to study tonight. (Or I will fail the exam tomorrow.)

He should drive carefully. He ought to drive carefully. (Or he will crash one day.)

You should speak loudly. You ought to speak loudly. (I can't hear you.)

Could and *might* are conditional forms of *can* and *may*. They are used to speculate about the present or future. *Could* indicates theoretical possibility, *might* indicates possibility + uncertainty.

She could come with us tomorrow. (It is possible. She will be free.)

She might come with us tomorrow. (We hope that it is possible, but we are not sure.)

Could is also the past form of *can* and expresses possibility, ability or permission in the past.

Possibility: *She could travel in our car.* (It was possible because we had a free seat for her.)

Ability: *She could play again in the last match.* (She was able to play because she was not ill anymore.)

Permission: *She could come with us last weekend.* (Her father allowed her to go.)

Perfect conditional tense

Form

Statement: *I would have practised*

Negative: *He would not have given*

Question: *Would you have practised?*

Neg. question: *Would she not have written?*

Short forms: *I'd have practised, He wouldn't have given, Wouldn't we have written?*

We make the perfect conditional tense with *would* and the perfect infinitive (*have* + past participle). In the first person singular and plural *should* instead of *would* is also possible. But it is not very common in modern English.

Use

We use the perfect conditional tense in English to speculate about the past situations which were theoretically possible, but did not happen in fact.

I would have learnt it. (But I didn't learn it.) *I would have told her.* (But she didn't want to listen.) *She wouldn't have married me.* (Because she didn't like me.)

Compare the present and perfect conditionals:

Present conditional

She would lend me some money now. (She is willing to lend me the money. I will ask her.)

Perfect conditional

She would have lent me some money last year. (She was willing to lend me the money, but I didn't ask her.)

Similarly: *I would do it. Will you help me?* x *I would have done it. But you didn't help me.*

Should, could and might are used in the same way.

You should finish it soon. x *You should have finished it. Why did you give up?*

We might have dinner. I am hungry. x *We might have had dinner. But we didn't eat anything.*

They could fly tomorrow. x *They could have flown last week. But they stayed at home.*

Should + perfect infinitive (*should have finished*) is used to express regrets or recommendations concerning the past.

He shouldn't have refused it. It was a good offer. (It is a pity that he refused it.)

Might + perfect infinitive (*might have had*) and *could* + perfect infinitive (*could have flown*) are used to speculate about the past. We say that something was possible, but we know that it did not happen.

He might/could have died. But they rescued him.

He might/could have won. But he didn't buy a lottery ticket.

Compare

In English we can also speculate about the past with *may* + perfect infinitive (it is not the conditional tense, however). In this case we do not know if the action really happened or not.

He may have died. (It is possible that he died. But maybe he is still alive.)

He may have won. (It is possible that he won. But maybe he lost.)