

# Grammar Reference

## Third conditional

We use the third conditional to talk about imagined past events: things that might have happened in the past, but didn't happen.

*If I'd known it was your birthday, I'd have bought you a present.  
If the taxi had arrived on time, he wouldn't have missed the plane.*

A conditional sentence has two parts. In the third conditional, the **if** part is the imaginary situation in the past, and the **main** part is what could have happened (but didn't happen) as a result. We make the third conditional with **if + past perfect**, and **would have + past participle**.

**If I'd known** it was your birthday... (This is the imaginary situation in the past)

**I'd have bought** you a present. (This is the imaginary result of the situation in the past)

The two parts can come in any order. When we write, we put a comma between the **if** part and the **main** part. You don't use a comma when the **main** part comes first.

*If I'd known it was your birthday, I'd have bought you a present.  
I'd have bought you a present if I'd known it was your birthday.  
If the taxi had arrived on time, Jack wouldn't have missed the plane.  
Jack wouldn't have missed the plane if the taxi had arrived on time.*

We use the past perfect in the **if** part to show the situation is imaginary and didn't actually happen. The **main** part of the sentence tells us the imaginary result of this situation.

**If there had been** any snow, **we'd have gone** skiing. (There wasn't any snow; we didn't go skiing.)

**If it hadn't been** raining, **we'd have had** a picnic. (It was raining; we didn't have a picnic.)

### Form

#### Positive

*If you'd asked me to marry you, I'd have said no.  
We'd have been in trouble if we'd missed the last train.*

#### Negative

*She wouldn't have become ill if she'd taken the medicine.  
It would have been better if they hadn't come to the party.  
If you hadn't been so friendly, I wouldn't have talked to you.*

#### Question

*What would they have done if they'd lost their jobs?  
If I'd told him the truth, how would he have felt?*

#### Short answer

In short answers, you use **would/wouldn't**.  
*If you'd needed help, would you have asked me?  
Yes, I would. / No, I wouldn't.*

#### Take note: past continuous

We can use **the past continuous** in the **if** part of the sentence.

*If he'd been driving more carefully, he wouldn't have had an accident.  
I wouldn't have met my girlfriend if I'd been living abroad.*

#### Take note: modals

We can use other modal verbs in the main part, for example **might**. **Might** shows we are less certain than when we use **will**.

*We might have been happier if we'd bought the other house.  
If he hadn't got up so late, he might not have missed the train.*

#### Take note: 'I wish ...' and 'If only ...'

We use **I wish** or **If only** with the past perfect when we are sorry about something that happened in the past, and we imagine doing things differently.

*I wish I'd stayed in bed this morning.* (I'm having a bad day today.)

*If only I'd stayed in bed this morning.*

*I wish I'd picked the other horse!* (My horse didn't win the race.)

*If only I'd picked the other horse!*

## Spoken English

In the third conditional, we usually use a short form of **had** and **had not** when we speak: I had = **I'd**, I had not = **I hadn't**. We also use a short form of **would** and **would not**: I would = **I'd**, he would = **he'd**, I would not = **I wouldn't**, etc.

*We'd have been unhappy if we'd lost the game.*

*We **wouldn't** have been happy if we **hadn't** won the game.*

The third conditional is sometimes confusing because **I'd** can mean both **I had** and **I would** – so listen carefully! And remember that **I'd** in the if part is **I had**, and **I'd** in the main part is **I would**.