Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful
Mini Lesson #17
If Clauses: Native Speakers Don’t Know Them Very Well

The purpose of this lesson is to describe two kinds of If Clauses used with reference to both present time and past time.

There are 2 kinds of If Clauses: CONTRARY-TO-FACT Clauses and CONDITIONAL Clauses.

CONTRARY-TO-FACT If Clauses are used to express ideas that are the opposite of reality. In the following example, the man is not rich.

If he were rich, he would take a long vacation.

CONDITIONAL If Clauses are used to describe situations which are not known for sure. In the following sentence, the man may be on vacation or he may not be.

If he is on a vacation, I hope he is enjoying it.

The time expressed by the If Clauses in these two sentences is the present. In the first sentence, he is not rich now. In the second sentence, he might be on vacation now and he might not be. The difference in meaning is conveyed by the use of ‘were’ in the first sentence and the use of ‘is’ in the second sentence. “If he were” means “He is not”, and “If he is” means “Maybe he is, maybe he is not”.

Similar If Clauses can be used in sentences about the past.

This CONTRARY-TO-FACT sentence is used to describe a situation that did not happen. She was not at the meeting and she did not chair the meeting.

If she had been at the meeting, she would have chaired it.

This CONDITIONAL sentence is used to suggest what might have happened, but it is unknown.

If she was at the meeting, I am sure she expressed her opinion.

The time expressed in the If Clauses of these two sentences is the past. In the first sentence, she was not at the meeting. In the second sentence, maybe she was at the meeting, maybe she
was not at the meeting. The difference in meaning in these sentences is conveyed by the use of ‘had been’ in the first sentence and of ‘was’ in the second sentence.

The two kinds of IF Clause sentences are presented in the following Chart. Notice that each sentence has an IF Clause followed by a Main Clause.

**KINDS OF IF CLAUSE SENTENCES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Contrary-To-Fact</th>
<th>Conditional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Present</strong></td>
<td>If she <em>wrote</em> it, it <em>would be</em> well written. (She doesn’t write it.)</td>
<td>If she <em>writes</em> it, it <em>is</em> well written. (Maybe she writes it, maybe not.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past</strong></td>
<td>If she <em>had written</em> it, it <em>would have been</em> well written. (She didn’t write it.)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With CONTRARY-TO-FACT If Clauses, the Main Clauses usually use Modal Helping Verbs. In CONDITIONAL If Clauses, the Main Clauses do not necessarily use Modal Helping Verbs.

IF Clause sentences can mix times between the If Clause and the Main Clause. This usually occurs when the IF Clause refers to a past time, and the Main Clause refers to a present time. Both CONTRARY-TO-FACT and CONDITIONAL If Clause sentences can have mixed times as shown in these examples.

*If he had gone yesterday, he would be telling me about it now.*
(He didn’t go yesterday, and he is not telling me about it now.)

*If he went there yesterday, he is probably on his way back now.*
(Maybe he went there yesterday, and if so, he is coming back now.)

IF Clauses are very difficult to use correctly. Native speakers of American English frequently do not use them correctly.

This lesson was developed by John Nelson and Tymofey Wowk, 2012