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.

<p style="text-align:center"><strong style="color:red">If he <u>were</u> rich, he would take a long vacation.</p>

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.

<p style="text-align:center"><strong style="color:red">If he <u>is</u> on a vacation, I hope he is enjoying it.</p>

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.

<p style="text-align:center"><strong style="color:red">If she <u>had been</u> at the meeting, she would have chaired it.</p>

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

<p style="text-align:center"><strong style="color:red">If she <u>was</u> at the meeting, I am sure she expressed her opinion.</p>

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

Time	Contrary-To-Fact	Conditional
Present Time	**If** she **wrote** it, it **would be** well written. (She doesn't write it.)	**If** she **writes** it, it **is** well written. (Maybe she writes it, maybe not.)
Past Time	**If** she **had written** it, it **would have been** well written (She didn't write it.)	**If** she **wrote** it, it **was** well written (Maybe she wrote it, maybe not.)

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