

56 Past conditions



My client is innocent. If he **had stolen** the company plans, he **wouldn't have kept** them in his office. Someone else put them there.

1 Third conditional

CONDITION <i>if + past perfect</i>	RESULT <i>would (not) + have + past participle</i>
<i>If we'd arrived on time,</i>	<i>we'd have flown to Majorca.</i>
<i>If we'd arrived on time,</i>	<i>we wouldn't have missed the flight.</i>
<i>If he hadn't stolen the money,</i>	<i>he wouldn't have lost his job.</i>

We usually use short forms (*we'd*, *wouldn't*, etc.) in this conditional.

We can also use *could have/might have + past participle* in the result clause:

*If we hadn't lost the semi-final, we **might have won** the tournament.* (less certain than *would*)
*You **could have gone** to university if you'd studied harder.* (= you would have been able to)

NATURAL ENGLISH In American English it is possible to use *would have + past participle* in the *if* clause, but most British English speakers think that is incorrect:

[*I **would have spoken** to you if I **would have seen** you.*]

✓ *I **would have spoken** to you if I **had seen** you.*

Differences between British and American English ➤ page 352

2 Unreal past conditions

We use the **third conditional** to imagine situations or actions in the past that we know are the opposite of the facts:

*If he **had stolen** the company plans, he **wouldn't have kept** them in his office.*

(We know that he didn't steal the company plans, but we imagine a past where he did this.)

If the past condition happened, we use a negative verb. If it didn't happen, we use a positive verb:

	CONDITION	RESULT
condition happened (I got the job.)	<i>If I hadn't got the job,</i>	<i>I might have stayed in London. I wouldn't have moved to Edinburgh.</i>
condition didn't happen (I didn't get the job.)	<i>If I had got the job,</i>	<i>I would have moved to Edinburgh. I couldn't have stayed in London.</i>

Sometimes we use conditional forms of verbs on their own:

*We were really enjoying the party and **would have stayed longer.*** (... if we hadn't had to leave)

*I **would have liked** to meet your friends from Argentina.* (... if I had had the opportunity)

3 Regrets

We can use the third conditional to talk about regrets from our past, often with *could have*:

*I **could have got** a better job if I'd stayed at university.*

*We **might not have had** the accident if the weather had been better.*

I wish, if only ➤ Unit 58.2