


# 39 I wish and if only



This country's full of rubbish tips. It's disgusting. I wish people would recycle their rubbish!

## 1 wish/if only + past simple and past perfect

We use *I/we wish* or *if only*

- + past simple to express a desire for something to be different in the present:  
*I wish I had lots of money.* (I want lots of money but I don't have it.)  
*We wish you didn't have to leave so soon.*  
(We don't want you to leave, but we know you have to.)
- + past perfect to express a wish that something different had happened in the past:  
*I feel sick. If only I hadn't eaten all those cakes!* (I ate them and now I regret it.)
- + *could* to describe a desire we know is impossible to achieve, often about ourselves:  
*If only we could see the situation through his eyes.* (We can't.)  
*I wish I could swim but I'm terrified of water!*

We can use *could* + *have* + past participle (► Unit 34.3) for a regret about the past:  
*I wish your father could have been there.* (Unfortunately, he wasn't able to be there.)



Pronunciation ► 1.13

## 2 wish/if only + would

*I/we wish/if only* + *would* usually expresses a desire for someone to change their behaviour in the present or future. We often use it to criticise or complain about something:

*I wish you'd stop looking at me like that. It's terribly distracting.*  
*If only you wouldn't shout. It's really irritating.*  
*I wish people would recycle their rubbish!*

We can also use this pattern with inanimate subjects for emphasis:

*If only the sun would come out so we could take the photos.*  
(The sun 'refuses' to come out. I want it to come out.)



We cannot use this form for an impossible change, or a change to the past. For these meanings we use the past simple (for present/future time) or the past perfect (for past time):

✗ *If only nuclear bombs wouldn't have been invented.* (a change to the past)  
✓ *If only nuclear bombs hadn't been invented.*

We can't use *would* when the subject of the wish and the subject of the change are the same. Instead we use a past tense or *could*:

✗ *I wish I would be more energetic.* (Subject of *wish* and *would* are the same.)  
✓ *If only I was more energetic.* ✓ *I wish I could be more energetic.*

## 3 Differences between wish and if only

*If only* is often more emphatic than *I wish*. Compare these examples:

*If only we'd seen you coming. We might have braked in time.* (a regret)  
*I wish we'd seen you coming. We would have put out the red carpet!* (a wish)

For greater emphasis we can put a subject between *if* and *only* in informal English:

*If you only knew how much trouble you've caused!*



*Wish* can be followed by *that*, but *if only* cannot:

✗ *If only that you'd told me about it earlier.* ✓ *I wish that you'd told me about it earlier.*