

40 Subjunctives and the 'unreal' past

After the earthquake, the government insisted that each new building have an earthquake-resistant steel and concrete frame.



1 Subjunctives

The subjunctive form is the same as the infinitive (without *to*). It does not show any marking for tense and can be used to refer to events in the past, present or future: *The judge insisted (that) Mr Grant **give** evidence despite his relationship to the accused.*

We use it most often in *that* clauses after certain verbs (e.g. *advise, ask, demand, insist, propose, recommend, require, request, suggest*), and after adjectives (e.g. *advisable, anxious, desirable, eager, essential, important, necessary, preferable, urgent, vital, willing*), to express the idea that something is necessary or important:

*In future cases it will be **vital** that each party **give** full disclosure prior to trial.*

We can use passive and negative forms of the subjunctive:

*Members of the committee suggested England **be excluded** from future tournaments.*

*Regulations require that officers **not enter** the crime scene without protective clothing.*

We use subjunctives

- in reported speech: *She insisted that she **pay** her own way.*
- in very formal language (e.g. legal documents):
*We require that all receipts **be submitted** to the committee for approval.*
- in poetry: *I know not whether laws **be** right or whether laws **be** wrong.* (Oscar Wilde)

As the subjunctive is seen as rather formal or literary (it is less formal and more common in American English), British English speakers often prefer alternative forms:

subjunctive	<i>It is essential that every applicant complete the form in triplicate.</i>
<i>should</i> + infinitive	<i>It is essential that every applicant should complete the form in triplicate.</i>
present simple	<i>It is essential that every applicant completes the form in triplicate.</i>
<i>for</i> + subject + <i>to</i> + infinitive	<i>It is essential for every applicant to complete the form in triplicate.</i>

There are some fixed expressions which use subjunctive forms:

*If he doesn't want to see us, then **so be it**.* (= then let it happen)

*I'll take it all the way to the Supreme Court **if need be**.* (= if this is necessary)

***Long live** the republic!*

2 The 'unreal' past

After a number of expressions such as *if only, it's time, what if, assuming, say, suppose/supposing, would rather/sooner, as if/though* and *I wish* we use past tenses (active and passive) to describe things in the present, past or future which are imagined. We sometimes refer to this use of past tenses as the 'unreal' past.

We can use the past simple or the past continuous after these expressions to talk about the imaginary present and future:

PRESENT ***It's time** they **were** forced to clear up the mess.*

(They aren't being forced to clear up at the moment.)

*These kids act **as if** they **owned** the place.* (They don't own it.)

FUTURE ***I wish** I **was coming** with you tomorrow.* (I am not coming with you.)

We use the past perfect to refer to something unreal in the past:

*I wish I'd **never started** this course.* (I have started it.)