

# THE FLATMATES

Language point:  
The third conditional



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# BBC Learning English – The Flatmates

## The Flatmates – The third conditional

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<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/flatmates/episode177/languagepoint.shtml>

A conditional is used to talk about a possible or imaginary situation (the condition) and the consequences (or the result) of it.

### The third conditional - meaning

We use the third conditional when we want to imagine a different past to that which actually occurred. In this episode of the flatmates, Sophie says the following to Alice.

**We wouldn't have had anywhere near such a good Christmas if you hadn't been there to cook the turkey!**

The real situation in the past was that Alice cooked the turkey and everybody had a good Christmas. When Sophie speaks, she imagines how the past would have been different, if Alice had not been there and had not cooked the turkey.

The third conditional gives the imaginary result, or consequence, of an unreal past.

### The third conditional - form

A basic conditional sentence has two clauses, namely the condition and the consequence.

In the following example, the condition is the first clause and the consequence is the second clause.

If you hadn't been there, we wouldn't have enjoyed Christmas so much.

For the condition: If + past perfect

For the consequence: would + have done (the perfect infinitive)

For example,

If we had left the house earlier, we would have caught the train.

If he hadn't been so lazy, he wouldn't have failed his exam.

It is possible to put the consequence before the condition. In that case, we do not usually separate the clauses with a comma.

We would have caught the train if we had left the house earlier.

He wouldn't have failed his exam if he hadn't been so lazy.

### Would or might?

We use would to show that we are certain about the consequence. If we are not certain about the consequence we can use might.

If he had studied harder, he would have passed the exam.

If he had studied harder, he might have passed the exam.

### **If only...**

We often use 'if only + past perfect' to express a strong regret about the past.

**If only I had studied harder.**

### **The third conditional – a variation**

The basic third conditional expresses an imagined past result of an unreal past condition.

**If I had studied harder, I would have passed the exam.**

In that situation, the reality is that the person did not study hard, and he or she failed the exam.

However, sometimes the imagined result could be true now, at the moment of speaking. For example,

**If I hadn't gone to university, I wouldn't be a teacher now.**

In that situation, the reality is that the person did go to university, and he or she is a teacher now.

If the imagined result, or consequence, could be true now, we use 'would do', not 'would have done'. But, because the condition is still an unreal past, we use the past perfect after 'if'.

**If I hadn't gone to university, I wouldn't be a teacher now.**

**If Alice had stayed in the flat over Christmas, she wouldn't know Sophie.**

### **Contractions**

It is common to use contractions with this language, particularly when it is spoken.

**If I'd studied harder, I'd have passed the exam**

If we use the negative forms – hadn't, wouldn't – we do not usually contract 'had' and 'would'.

## BBC Learning English – The Flatmates

### Vocabulary:

#### fireworks

explosive devices that create patterns of light in the sky, usually used at celebrations and big parties

#### to get to know someone

to meet someone and then become friends with them

#### turkey

a large bird that is often eaten for dinner at Christmas in the UK, and at Thanksgiving in the USA

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