

Conditionals: if you had gone...

a) Form

Read the following information about a past action and its result:

He went to the casino. He lost all his money.

This is what actually happened. But we can imagine a different past action and a different result:

if + had (not) done would (not) + have done

If he had not gone to the casino, he would not have lost all his money.

This is the 3rd conditional. In speech, these forms are often abbreviated:

A: What would've happened if he hadn't gone to the casino?

B: If he hadn't gone to the casino, he wouldn't've lost all his money.

The if clause can come in the first part of the sentence (as above) or the second:

He wouldn't have lost all his money if he hadn't gone to the casino.

b) Positives and negatives

When we use the 3rd conditional, we are imagining a situation that is the opposite of what happened. If what actually happened was negative, we use a positive form. If what actually happened was positive, we use a negative form:

what happened: We (neg) didn't put up our prices, so we (pos) kept our market share.

3rd conditional: If we (pos) had put up our prices, we (neg) wouldn't have kept our market share.

Common mistakes:

We do not use would in the if clause:

wrong: *If I would have known you were at the office, I would have called in.

right: If I had known you were at the office, I would have called in.

c) Variations

We can use could or might instead of would:

If we had followed his advice, we could have lost a great deal of money. (but we didn't)

If we had offered large quantity discounts, we might have won the order. (but we didn't)

d) Mixed conditionals

The examples in c) are about two actions in the past. However, if we talk about a past action and its result in the present we use if + past perfect and would (not) + infinitive:

past action: He did well on the training course. present result: He is head of department now.

mixed conditional: If he hadn't done well on the training course, he wouldn't be head of department now. **(not: *wouldn't have been)**