

Third Conditional

What is the third conditional?

The third conditional is a structure to talk about unreal events or situations in the past. It's also sometimes referred to as type three conditionals. Here are two examples:

If I had stayed in school, I would have gotten a much better job now.

If Frank had gotten married to Stacy in high school, he would have had children by now.

What is the sentence structure?

The third conditional consists of two clauses, an if-clause and a main clause. The if-clause uses the past perfect tense (had + past participle):

IF-CLAUSE: If | subject | had | past participle | object/complement

If | she | had | exercised

If | Pete | hadn't | visited | Spain

If | I | had | trusted | the economy

MAIN CLAUSE: subject | would | have | past participle | object/complement

She | wouldn't | have | developed | high blood pressure.

He | would never | have | met | his wife.

I | would | have | left | my money in the stock market.

Put the if-clause and the main clause together, and you have a third conditional sentence. Notice there is a comma between the IF-CLAUSE and MAIN CLAUSE:

If Pete hadn't visited Spain, he would never have met his wife.

If I had trusted the economy, I would have left my money in the stock market.

The clauses may be inverted to MAIN CLAUSE + IF-CLAUSE. For example:

Pete would never have met his wife if he hadn't visited Spain.

I would have left my money in the stock market if I had trusted the economy.

How is the third conditional used?

Type three conditionals express an unreal past event from which a present or future event is made unreal. The if-clause is the initial, unreal event in the past. The main clause is the unreal event in the present or future. For example:

A: Did you hear? Penny was hospitalized for high blood pressure.

B: Well, she *wouldn't have developed* high blood pressure *if* she had exercised sometimes.

This response means that Penny never exercised. As a result, she developed high blood pressure and was hospitalized for it. Here are a few more examples:

If I had been on time to the interview, I would have gotten the job.

If 9/11 had never happened, Bush wouldn't have gotten re-elected.

If more money had been spent on solar power, global warming wouldn't be so serious.

Is there additional information on the third conditional?

Yes, there is one point. Modals may be used in lieu of *would* in type three conditionals. The main clause may use *could* and *might*, with each adding either a degree of speculation or advice.

If Benny had worked harder, he *could* have gotten that promotion.

If you had spent money more wisely, you *could* have bought a house by now.

If the US had caught Osama Bin Laden, then we *might* have less to worry about.

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