

conditionals: impossible past, wishes

impossible or past conditions (conditional 3)

if X had happened, Y would have happened
 These sentences describe what the speaker thinks would have happened as a consequence of a situation which is in the past, so is impossible to change.

On 18 June 1815 the Coalition Army under Wellington and Blücher defeated Napoleon and the French army. But what would have happened if Napoleon had won the battle?
 would have + verb
 past perfect
 would have + verb

I'm sorry I didn't talk to you yesterday, but I simply didn't see you!
 if I'd seen you, I would have said hello.

We also use *might have* or *could have* in place of *would have*. See Unit 25.

past condition with a result in the present

if X had happened, Y would be different
 We often think about past events, and their effects on the present.

if Chris hadn't gone to the hospital, he wouldn't be alive today.

wishes

- about the present
 When we use *wish* to make a wish about the present, we use the *unreal past simple*, as in an unreal conditional sentence. We can also use *could* / *was able to*.

I wish I knew more about European history.
 (= if I knew more about it now, I would be happier.)

I wish I could swim really fast.

- wishes about the past

When we use *wish* to make a wish about the past, we use the past perfect, as in an impossible past conditional sentence.

I wish I had been present at the battle of Waterloo.

(= if I had been present at the battle of Waterloo, I would have been happy!)

- wishes with *would*

We also use *wish* with *would* when we want someone to do something or not to do something. This is often because we think it is a bad habit.

I wish you wouldn't keep staring at me!

I wish Pete would phone.

- if only

We can use *if only* to make a stronger kind of wish about the present or the past.

If only I knew more about European history!

If only I had studied harder!