Conditional Phrases + Modals
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What are Conditionals?
Conditionals, or *if* statements, are used with verbs to express scenarios that may or may not realistically happen (e.g. it’s unlikely that you will get sunburned on a day with rain in the forecast). There are three different degrees of conditional phrases (1st, 2nd, and 3rd conditional), each of which deals with a different level of likelihood for the events discussed.

Conditional phrases can be written two ways. They can be written with the *if* statement first or reversed with the *if* statement last, leaving the comma out if the sentence is not too long. For example:

- If you go to the lake, you might see the giant squid.
- You might see the giant squid if you go to the lake.

Modal Auxiliaries
Many conditional phrases use modal auxiliaries (e.g. *might*, *can*, *should*) to modify the meaning of verbs and sentences in several ways. These phrases also express the degree of logical possibility or capability of the verb or sentence. Some of the most commonly used modal auxiliaries in conditional phrases include *can*, *would*, *could*, and *might*. Here’s what each of them means in the context of conditional phrases:

- **Can** expresses that if a condition is met, it is 100% possible that something is capable of occurring. *It is used with the first conditional.*
- **Would** expresses that if a very unlikely (or even impossible) condition is met, something will definitely occur. *It is used with the 2nd and 3rd conditionals.*
- **Could** expresses that if a very unlikely (or even impossible) condition is met, something can happen, but it may or may not. *It is used with the 2nd and 3rd conditionals.*
- **Might** expresses that if a condition, likely or otherwise, is met, something can happen, but it may or may not. *It is used with all three levels of conditionals.*

1st Conditional
The 1st conditional is used to describe events that are fairly possible and realistic. It implies that an event can happen (or at the very least is likely to happen) if a condition is met. It’s constructed using *if* with present or future tense verbs. For example:

- If Harry Potter gets his letter, he will attend Hogwarts.
- If Hermione does her homework, she can go to bed.

These examples use the 1st conditional because they express conditions that are likely to be met (Harry will possibly get his letter and Hermione will probably finish her homework), yet those conditions still need to be met for the other events (attending Hogwarts or going to bed) to occur.
2nd Conditional
The 2nd conditional deals with future events that are less likely to happen or even impossible. It’s constructed using *if* and a past tense verb in the first clause, followed by the modal auxiliaries *would* or *could* preceding a present tense verb in the second. For example:

- If Voldemort *had* a nose, he *could* wear glasses.
- If Ron Weasley *increased* his self-esteem, he *would be* better at sports.

These examples use 2nd conditional because they describe conditions that are unlikely or impossible (Ron probably won’t increase his self-esteem and Voldemort will likely never have a nose), and thus they include modal auxiliaries like *would* or *could*.

Sometimes the second conditional is used to politely give someone advice on a sensitive topic. For example:

- Ron, you *could get* better grades. (direct and impolite)
- Maybe *if* you *studied*, Ron, you *would get* better grades. (indirect and polite)

3rd Conditional
The 3rd conditional expresses regret over an event that has already happened, yet which could have gone differently. It’s constructed using *if* along with a past perfect tense verb in the first clause, followed by modal auxiliaries like *might*, *could*, *should*, or *would* and a present perfect tense verb in the second clause. For example:

- If Harry *had listened* to Hermione, he *would have developed* a better plan.
- If Dumbledore *had fed* his pet phoenix, Fawkes, the phoenix *might have been* happier.

These examples use 3rd conditional because they describe events that happened in the past which led to feelings of regret (Harry now regrets not listening to Hermione, and Dumbledore regrets not feeding Fawkes) and which could have happened differently (Harry could have developed a better plan, Fawkes could have been happier).

**BE CAREFUL:** Sometimes the third conditional can be difficult to understand when used with negative constructions. For example:

- If Harry *hadn’t listened* to Hermione, he *would not have developed* a better plan.

In the above example, it’s unclear if Harry listened to Hermione, and it’s also hard to judge the quality of Harry’s plan.

* If you have questions on tenses, please see the handout on Verb Tense.

**Extra Credit - Conditional Clauses**
Conditional clauses take place using the subjunctive mood, which is a formal tone used in academia, but is becoming less popular in everyday use. With the subjective mood, the verb is always used in its base form (ex: were, eat, give, want) despite the number of subjects involved (which may seem counterintuitive to daily use). Conditional clauses operate when a circumstance is untrue and the sentence includes words such as *if*, *as if*, or *as though*. For example:

- If I *were* a wizard, I would attend Hogwarts (note the use of were and not was).
- Malfoy behaves *as though* the wizarding world *were* indebted to his family (were not was).

**Works Consulted:**
UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center (http://writingcenter.unc.edu/); University of Nevada at Las Vegas Writing Center (http://writingcenter.unlv.edu/); *Writing Matters: A Handbook for Writing and Research*, 2nd ed. (Howard)