The Zero Conditional (The Logical Conditional)

This is sometimes also called the present conditional because the first and the second clauses use the present simple tense most of the time. We use this conditional to talk about a fact or convey a logical conclusion. For example:

- If you mix yellow and blue, you get green.
- If you heat water to 100 degrees Celsius, it boils.
- If you fall off your motorcycle, it hurts.

The structure looks like this:
If + present tense clause + present tense clause

You can substitute the word when for the word if in many sentences and it will mean the same.

- When you heat oil, it starts to smoke.
- When you read books, you learn things.

Occasionally we use the past simple in both the if-clause and the main clause as shown in the following examples:

- If Peter was at home, he didn't answer the phone. (When we make assumptions)
- If ever I was bored, I hung around with my mates. (When we talk about the way things used to be in the past)

As a rule, we don’t teach zero conditionals. Our non-native learners seem to pick this up as they go along as it is not a structure we use very much.

The First Conditional (The Probable Future Conditional)

In this conditional the if-clause generally uses the present simple tense while the main clause uses the future simple tense. The first conditional can be used for a variety of functions including: to give warnings, to make threats, to make promises, to give advice and give directions. We use this structure to talk about a probable future. For example:

- If you study this book, you’ll have a much better understanding of grammar.
- If you come near me again, I'll call the police.
- If you put your hand in the lion’s cage, it will bite your arm off. (Not the cage, the lion, you fool)

The structure looks like this:
If + present tense clause + future simple tense clause

However, there are occasions when we can use a continuous tense in the first clause and other future structures (such as modal verbs) in the second clause as shown in the following examples:

- If it rains, we might go to the cinema.
- If my ex-girlfriend should happen to turn up, I’ll probably leave.
- Sometimes, if I’m working hard in my office, I won’t answer the door.

As a rule, we introduce the first conditional structure to lower intermediate students.

The Second Conditional (The Hypothetical Conditional)

In this conditional, the first clause uses the past simple tense and the second clause uses the bare infinitive form preceded by the modal verb would. We use the second conditional form to talk about an unreal or hypothetical present or future. For example:

- If I won the lottery, I’d buy a big house on the south coast of Spain.
- If I were you, I’d write her a letter and explain my feelings.
- If Elvis were alive, he would have something to say about today’s music.

The structure looks like this:
If + past tense clause + modal verb ‘would’ + infinitive clause

However, sometimes other modal verbs can be used instead of would, such as could or might. Here are some examples which you will see in the main clause.

- If I went to see that film again, I could take my friend Catherine.
- If she ever talked to me again, I would do a little dance in the street.
- If I saw him again, I ought to break his neck.

As a rule, we introduce the second conditional structure to lower intermediate or intermediate students.
The Third Conditional (The Past Conditional)

In this conditional, commonly called the past conditional, the first clause uses the past perfect tense and the second clause uses the past participle preceded by the modal verb would and the auxiliary verb have. We use the third conditional form when we want to express regret or to express what might have been.

- If I had run faster, I would have caught the bus.
- If I had known you were coming, I would have baked a cake.
- If I had been kinder to my girlfriend she wouldn't have left me.

The structure looks like this:

**If + past perfect tense clause + modal verb “would” + auxiliary verb “have” + past participle**

Again, sometimes other modal verbs can be used instead of would, such as could or might. Here are some examples which you will see in the main clause.

- If Martin hadn't met Julie, he might have been single all his life.
- If Mark hadn’t been nasty to his girlfriend, he could’ve still been with her.
- If you had told me you were coming, I might’ve asked you to get some milk.

Mixed Conditionals

This structure mixes the if-clause from the third conditional and the main clause from the second conditional. For example:

- If I had listened to my mother, I wouldn’t be here now.
- If I hadn't wasted my life on drink and drugs, I would have a good job and lots of money.
- If Catherine had only planned ahead, she wouldn’t be stuck in a war torn country.

Occasionally, this structure mixes the if-clause from the second conditional and the main clause from the third conditional. For example:

- If he really wanted to do it, he would have done it before now.
- If James thought about it, he would have come to the same conclusion.
- If Martin were rich, he would have shared his money with me.

Variations of Conditional Structures

The conditional clauses can change places in a sentence. The “if” word appears in the middle of the sentence, as shown in the following sentences:

- You get green, if you mix blue and yellow.
- You’ll get a much better understanding of grammar, if you study this book.
- I’d pay off all my debts, if I won the lottery.

Also, you can do away with the “if” word altogether in certain structures.

- Had I known it was you, I wouldn’t have answered the door.
- Were we to offer you more money, would you do it?
- Should anyone call, tell them I’m busy.

There are even certain expressions in the English language where you only need one clause in a conditional as shown in the following spoken phrases:

- Martin, if you could shut the door, please.
- Chloë, if you could do me a favour.
- Amy, if you wouldn’t mind.

If + not in the first conditional is sometimes replaced by unless, e.g. I won't pay you if you don’t do your job properly – I won’t pay you unless you do your job properly.