

57 First conditional

Form

If clause			Main clause		
If	noun / pronoun	present simple	noun / pronoun	'll / will can might may should must have to	verb base form

There are two clauses in a first conditional sentence. We use the present simple in the *if* clause and *will* (or another modal) in the main clause. The clauses can come in either order. When the *if* clause comes first, we use a comma.

If I see him, I'll pass on your message or *I'll pass on your message if I see him.*

If they change their minds, he might give them a refund or *He might give them a refund if they change their minds.*

The present progressive can be used instead of the present simple.

If Laura is coming to the party, Marco will be really happy.

Presentation



Chain story

- 1) Draw Magda on the board, looking miserable. Elicit from students why she's unhappy and after a few suggestions tell them she is unhappy because she thinks she is going to lose her job.
- 2) Elicit or model what she's thinking about what's going to happen. You might want to show a picture to help students here (*If I lose my job, I'll move to the countryside*). Drill this with students.

- 3) Follow this up with further links in the story (*If I move to the countryside, I'll buy a pet dog. If I have a dog, we'll go for a walk every day. If I go for a walk every day, I'll get fit. If I get fit, I could get a new job as a sports teacher*). To focus on meaning, the events in the story should all seem likely or possible.
- 4) Give students lots of practice repeating all the sentences. See if they can memorise the whole chain.
- 5) Start again, with a new story. Give a starter line (Pierre is thinking about his exam: *If I pass my exam . . .*). Get students to continue building the chain from there – either as a whole class or in pairs.

Practice

Weather

Get students to say what they will do at the weekend if the weather is good or bad (*If it's nice weather, I'll go to the beach. If it rains, I'll meet my friends at the shops*).

Holidays

Tell students that they are all going on holiday to a foreign country. Ask them to think about what they will do in different places. Give an example or two first (*If I go to Brazil, I'll dance in a carnival. If I go to London, I'll visit the British Museum*) then write up some new sentence starters for them to discuss and complete (*If I go to Russia . . . / Italy . . . / Spain . . . / Thailand . . . / India . . .*).

Big decision

Set students a situation in which someone has to make a big decision (leaving school, changing job). Write up the beginnings of some sentences (*If I move to Australia . . . , If I pass my exams . . .*) and get students to finish them.

Superstitions

See how many superstitions your class can describe using the first conditional (*If you walk under a ladder, you'll have seven years bad luck. If you see a black cat, you'll meet a stranger*). Then get them to invent a few brand new superstitions.

Bank robbery

Tell the students to plan a bank robbery! Give them a map of the town centre with banks marked. They should make some appropriate *if* sentences (*If we go at night, there will be fewer people. If the bank has lots of money, we'll need a large van. It will be better if we go in the back door. If someone tells the police, we'll get caught. If we escape, we'll be rich*). You could provide sentence starters to help them, if you wish.

Host family

Get students to think of warnings or advice that one student might give when a new student moves into the same host family (*If you touch the dog, it'll bite you. If you stay out late, she'll be angry. If you have any problems, I'll help you. If you go to*

London, you'll love it). Extend by getting students to think of some advice, offers and warnings for another situation (a new student arriving in your class, a family taking a holiday in your town).

Concept questions

- **If Franz sees Gabi, he'll tell her.** Will Franz see Gabi? (*Maybe*) Will he definitely see her? (*No*) Is there a chance that he will see her? (*Yes*) Is it very likely that he will see her? (*We don't know but there is probably a good chance*)
- **If we don't go now, we'll be late for the meeting.** Are we going to the meeting? (*Yes*) Are we going to be late? (*Maybe*) Are we definitely going to be late? (*No*) What can we do to avoid being late? (*Leave now*)

Meaning and use

The first conditional is used to talk about things that are normal, possible and quite likely to happen. It is typically used to . . .

- give warnings and advice.
If you pick it up when it's hot, you'll burn your fingers.
- make predictions; speculate about future events.
If it works, we'll make a lot of money.
- threaten.
If you don't leave right now, I'll . . .
- make offers, promises; barter.
If you lend me the football, I'll lend you my Scrabble set.
- discuss hypotheses; offer theories.
If the lever moves clockwise, I think the gate will open.
- draw conclusions from evidence.
If they are all here, then there is nobody at Reception.
- state instructions.
If you press button C, the machine will switch off.

Teaching tip: conditional percentages

Teachers sometimes like to offer students a guideline for the meaning of the first conditional as '50% chance of happening', there is about an equal chance that the condition will or won't be fulfilled. This is a useful teaching shorthand, though not really accurate as the first conditional can also be used for conditions with very little chance of happening or 60% or 99% – or whatever.

However, the guideline does help clarify the contrast with the second conditional which is sometimes said to have a 0–1% chance of happening.