

## If I were you ...; imagine he were to win

Reminder → M13–M17

A

In *unreal* conditional sentences we can use **were** after any subject in the **if-clause**, including singular first and third person subjects

(e.g. **I / she / he / it**). This use of **were** is sometimes called the *past subjunctive*, and is generally preferred only in formal contexts. Note that although the verb has a past form, reference is to the imagined present or future:

- If your mother were** here, I'm sure she wouldn't let you eat all those chocolates.
- My job would not exist **if it were not for** government funding.

**Was** can be used instead of **were** with the same meaning ('If your mother was here ...', etc.). However, we prefer **were** rather than **was** when we give advice with **If I were you ...**:

- If I were you**, I'd take it back to the shop. It's got a hole in it. (*rather than* If I was you ...)

B

**Were** is used in this way in other patterns when we talk about *imaginary situations* –

(i) when we use **were + subject + to-infinitive** or **were + subject** as a more formal alternative to **if + subject + was / were** (see also Unit 84A):

- Were the election to be** held today, the Liberals would win easily. (*or* **If the election was / were** held today ...)
- Were I not** in my seventies and rather unfit, I might consider taking up squash. (*or* **If I wasn't / weren't** in my seventies and rather unfit ...)

(ii) after **wish**:

- I enjoy my job enormously, but I *wish* **it were** closer to home. (*or* ... I *wish* **it was** ...)
- Of course I'm pleased that Jan has been given the award. I only *wish* **he weren't** so boastful about it. (*or* ... I only *wish* **he wasn't** ...)

(iii) after **if only** when we express our regret that a situation isn't different:

- 'If your job is so bad, why don't you leave?' '*If only* **it were** that simple.' (*or* *If only* **it was** ...)
- I'd really like to do accounting. *If only* **I weren't** so poor at maths. (*or* *If only* **I wasn't** ...)

(iv) after **would ('d) rather** and **would ('d) sooner** when we talk about preferences:

- I feel embarrassed about what happened and *would rather* **the event were** forgotten. (*or* ... **was** forgotten.)
- 'I've arranged a meeting for the end of July.' '*I'd sooner* **it were** earlier, if possible. (*or* ... **it was** earlier.)

(v) in sentences or clauses beginning with **suppose**, **supposing** and **imagine**:

- Suppose* **I were** to lower the price by £100. Would you consider buying the car then? (*or* *Suppose* **I was** to lower ...)
- I know it looks rather dirty now, but *imagine* **the house were** (to be) repainted. It would look a lot more attractive. (*or* ... *imagine* **the house was** (to be) repainted.)

And in *comparisons* we can use **were** –

(vi) after **as if** and **as though** (see Unit 84D) and **even if**:

- I remember stepping off the boat in New York *as if* **it were** yesterday.
- Despite losing the election, she continues to act *as though* **she were** prime minister.
- It's too late to start the work this year *even if* **it were** possible to find the money for it.

# Exercises

85.1 Match an item from (i) with an ending from (ii) to form a sentence. Begin **Were ... (not)**. (B)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (i)  | (i)  |
| 1 ... found guilty of libel ...                                  | a the glass would certainly break                      |
| 2 ... government to increase university fees ...                 | b you would be horrified                               |
| 3 ... anyone to lean against the window ...                      | c I would gladly accept your invitation                |
| 4 ... not already busy in August ...                             | d there would be an outcry from students               |
| 5 ... to see the conditions in which the refugees are living ... | e <del>the newspaper would face huge legal costs</del> |

1 + e Were it to be found guilty of libel, the newspaper would face huge legal costs.

85.2 Expand the notes to write a sentence to go before each question below. Use **Suppose, Supposing, or Imagine**, followed by a pronoun, noun or noun phrase and then **were**. (Bv)

- (miss / last train) Supposing we were to miss the last train. How would we get home?
- (inherit / million dollars) .....  
How would it change your life?
- (parents / tell you / emigrating to Canada) .....  
How do you think you would react?
- (Spain / win / World Cup) .....  
How would you celebrate?
- (population of Britain / all Buddhist) .....  
How would its society be different?

85.3 Complete the sentences with either **as if** or **even if** followed by an appropriate pronoun and then **were**. (Bvi)

- Muller spoke slowly as if it were a great physical effort.
- Every day Mrs Demir would walk around the park ..... snowing.
- She knew she wouldn't be able to eat rabbit meat ..... starving.
- Theo completely ignored me ..... not standing next to him.
- He picked Natasha up ..... no heavier than a two-year-old.
- I don't think I would have got the job ..... better qualified.
- When Martina saw that I was stuck she laughed out loud ..... a joke.
- I wouldn't accept the job ..... to offer it to me.

85.4 Complete the sentences using one of the phrases in (i) with expanded notes from (ii). (A & B)

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|--|---|
| (i)  | (ii)  |
| <del>if it were not for</del><br>wish he were<br>'d rather it were | if I were you<br>if only it were<br>'d sooner she were  |
|  | forgotten ... classmates<br>going ... friends<br>not so critical ... employees<br><del>long nights ... winter</del><br>as easy ... that<br>breakfast before ... leave |

- I would be happy to live in the north of Sweden if it were not for the long nights in winter.
- I'm not happy about Jess going to Thailand alone. I .....
- A: If you're unhappy with your new car, why don't you ask for your money back?  
B: Well, .....
- I know you haven't got much time, but .....
- Wearing odd shoes to school was embarrassing and I .....
- I'm very fond of Paul, but I .....