

If I knew . . . I wish I knew . . .

A

Study this example situation:

Sue wants to call Paul, but she can't because she doesn't know his phone number. She says:

If I knew his number, I would call him.

Sue says: *If I knew his number . . .* This tells us that she doesn't know his number. She is imagining the situation.



When you imagine a situation like this, you use *if + past* (*if I knew / if you were / if we didn't*, etc.). But the meaning is present, not past:

- Tom would read more if he had more time. (but he doesn't have much time)
- If I didn't want to go to the party, I wouldn't go. (but I want to go)
- We wouldn't have any money if we didn't work. (but we work)
- If you were in my position, what would you do?
- It's a shame you can't drive. It would be helpful if you could.

B

We use the past in the same way after *wish* (*I wish I knew / I wish you were*, etc.). We use *wish* to say that we regret something, that something is not as we would like it to be:

- I wish I knew Paul's phone number. (= I don't know it and I regret this.)
- Do you ever wish you could fly? (You can't fly.)
- It rains a lot here. I wish it didn't rain so often.
- It's very crowded here. I wish there weren't so many people.
- I wish I didn't have to work. (but I have to work)

I wish I had an umbrella.



C

After *if* and *wish*, we normally use *were* with *I/he/she/it*. *Was* is also possible. So we say:

- If I were you, I wouldn't buy that coat. or If I was you, . . .
- I'd go out if it weren't raining. or . . . if it wasn't raining.
- I wish Carol were here. or I wish Carol was here.

D

We do not normally use *would* in the *if* part of the sentence or after *wish*:

- If I were rich, I would have a yacht. (*not* If I would be rich)
- I wish I had something to read. (*not* I wish I would have)

Sometimes *wish . . . would* is possible: *I wish you would listen*. See Unit 38C.

E

Note that *could* sometimes means "would be able to" and sometimes "was/were able to":

- You could get a job more easily (= you would be able to get)
- if you could use a computer. (= you were able to use)

Exercises

36.1 Put the verb into the correct form.

1. If I knew his phone number, I would call him. (know)
2. I wouldn't buy that coat if I were you. (not / buy)
3. I _____ you if I could, but I'm afraid I can't. (help)
4. We would need less money if we _____ in the country. (live)
5. If we had the choice, we _____ in the country. (live)
6. This soup isn't very good. It _____ better if it weren't so salty. (taste)
7. I wouldn't mind living in Maine if the weather _____ better. (be)
8. If I were you, I _____. (not / wait) I _____ now. (go)
9. You're always tired. If you _____ to bed so late every night, you wouldn't be tired all the time. (not / go)
10. I think there are too many cars. If there _____ so many cars (not / be), there _____ so much pollution. (not / be)

36.2 Write a sentence with *If . . .* for each situation.

1. We don't visit you very often because you live so far away.
If you didn't live so far away, we'd visit you more often.
2. That book is too expensive, so I'm not going to buy it.
If the book _____, I _____.
3. We don't go out very often because we can't afford it.

4. It's raining, so we can't have lunch on the patio.

5. I have to work late tomorrow, so I can't meet you for dinner.

36.3 Write sentences beginning *I wish*.

1. I don't know many people (and I'm lonely). I wish I knew more people.
2. I don't have a key (and I need one). I wish _____.
3. Amanda isn't here (and I need to see her). _____
4. It's cold (and I hate cold weather). _____
5. I live in a big city (and I don't like it). _____
6. I can't go to the party (and I'd like to). _____
7. I have to work tomorrow (but I'd like to stay in bed). _____
8. I don't know anything about cars (and my car has just broken down). _____
9. I'm not lying on a beautiful sunny beach (and that's a shame). _____

36.4 Write your own sentences beginning *I wish*.

1. (somewhere you'd like to be now – on the beach, in New York, in bed, etc.)
I wish I _____.
2. (something you'd like to have – a computer, a job, lots of money, etc.)

3. (something you'd like to be able to do – sing, speak a language, fly, etc.)

4. (something you'd like to be – beautiful, strong, rich, etc.)
