

Unit 9 Unreal tenses and subjunctives

Explanations

It's time

1 *It's time, It's high time*

These are followed by past simple or continuous, though the time referred to is unreal. See Unit 8.

It's time we left. It's high time I was/were going.

2 *Was or were*

As in conditional sentences, *were* can be used for all persons of *be*, though *was* is more common in everyday speech.

Wishes

1 Present

These are wishes where you want to change a present state.

I wish I had a motorbike. (I don't have one now.)

I wish you weren't leaving. (You are leaving.)

I wish I was going on holiday with you. (I am not going.)

2 *Would and could*

If the verb is an event verb, the reference is to the future. We use *would* or *could* after wish. *Would* here means 'decided to'.

I wish you would leave.

I wish I could come on holiday with you next year.

The use with *would* is often used to describe an annoying habit.

I wish you wouldn't make such a mess.

3 Past

These are wishes referring to a past event, which cannot be changed.

I wish I hadn't eaten so much.

This use is common after *if only* to express regrets. See Unit 8

4 Hope

Wishes about simple future events are expressed with *hope*.

I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow.

I hope he'll stop talking soon!

I'd rather/I prefer (followed by a clause)

- 1 *I'd rather* is followed by past tenses in the same way as wishes about the present. It expresses a personal preference about actions.
I'd rather you didn't smoke in here.
I'd sooner works in the same way.
 Both *I'd rather* and *I'd sooner* are used with normal tenses when comparing nouns or phrases.
I'd rather be a sailor than a soldier. (present)
I'd rather have lived in Ancient Greece than Ancient Rome. (past)
- 2 *I'd prefer* can be used as part of a conditional 2 sentence. Note that 'prefer' in this type of sentence has an object 'it'.
I'd prefer it if you didn't go.
I'd prefer is not followed by an unreal tense.
I'd prefer tea to coffee.
I'd prefer you not to go.

As if, As though

- 1 Real and unreal
 The tense here depends on whether the comparison is true or unreal.
He acts as if he were in charge. (He isn't in charge.)
He acts as if he is in charge. (He is in charge.)
 The difference is clearer with obviously unreal comparisons.
You look as if you had just seen a ghost!
 In everyday speech, there is often no obvious difference made.
- 2 Present and past reference are both possible.
I feel as if I were flying. (I'm not.)
I feel as if an express train had hit me. (It didn't.)

Suppose and imagine

- 1 Understood conditions
 The conditional part of these sentences is often understood but not stated.
Imagine we won the pools! (Imagine what we would do if...)
Suppose someone told you that I was a spy! (What would you say?)
 As with conditional sentences, if the event referred to is a real possibility, rather than imaginary, a present tense is possible:
Suppose it starts raining, what'll we do?
- 2 Present or past
 Present and past reference are both possible.
Imagine we'd never met!
Suppose we went to Wales for a change.

Formal
Subjunctives

- 1 Insisting, demanding etc.
After verbs such as *demand, insist, suggest, require* which involve an implied obligation, the subjunctive may be used in formal style. This has only one form, that of the infinitive, and there is no third person -s, or past form. The verb *be* has *be* for all forms.

They demanded that he leave at once.

The same applies after expressions such as *it is necessary/essential/important that ...*

It is essential that you arrive before six.

- 2 Less formal usage
Less formally, *should* can be used, and colloquially no tense change is made, or an infinitive construction is used.

They demanded that he should leave.

They demanded that he left. (informal)

It is essential for you to arrive before six.

Formulaic
Subjunctive

These are fixed expressions all using subjunctive. Typical examples are:

God save the Queen!

Be that as it may ...

Come what may ...

Activities

1
Choose between
hope and *wish* in
each sentence.

- a) I hope/wish I'll see you again soon.
b) I hope/wish the weather improves soon.
c) I hope/wish I knew the answer.
d) I hope/wish you didn't have to go.
e) I hope/wish you'd stop shouting so much.
f) I hope/wish nothing goes wrong.
g) I hope/wish it would stop raining.
h) I hope/wish you can come to my party.
i) I hope/wish you don't mind.
j) I hope/wish we could meet next week.

2
Put each verb in
brackets into a
suitable tense.

- a) I would say it was time you started (start) working seriously.
b) I'd rather you (not watch) television while I'm reading.
c) I wish I (spend) more time swimming last summer.
d) Helen is so bossy. She acts as if she (own) the place.
e) I wish you (not keep) coming late to class.
f) Suppose a complete stranger (leave) you a lot of money in their will!
g) I wish I (go) to your party after all.



- h) I'd rather you (sit) next to Susan, please.
 i) The government demanded that the ambassador (be) recalled.
 j) You are lucky going to Italy. I wish I (go) with you.

3

Correct the error or errors in each sentence.

- a) I wish I bought that old house.
 b) I'd rather you don't eat all the bread.
 c) It's time I go.
 d) I wish I own a motorbike.
 e) I wish we are not leaving in the morning.
 f) Sue would rather reading than watching television.
 g) Come what comes, I'll be on your side.
 h) I hope it would stop raining.
 i) I'd prefer you didn't wait.
 j) I wish I didn't listen to you before.

4

Complete each sentence with a suitable word or phrase.

- a) I wish you would stop making so much noise late at night!
 b) I'd rather the children on the television without permission.
 c) Suppose half the money I owe you. Would that satisfy you?
 d) I hope get into trouble on my account.
 e) This is an awful hotel. I wish we to the Grand instead.
 f) It is absolutely you contact head office in advance.
 g) I think it's high time we locking all the windows at night.
 h) Would you rather I the lunch, if you feel tired?
 i) I wish my car as fast as yours.
 j) I'd prefer you smoke in here, if you don't mind.

5

Complete each sentence with *one* word.

- a) It's high time you learned to look after yourself!
 b) I wish you try listening to me just for once!
 c) I rather not go by bus, if possible.
 d) that as it may, it doesn't alter the seriousness of the problem.
 e) I wish Carol be here to see you all.
 f) We both wish you staying longer.
 g) You as if you had played in the match instead of watching it!
 h) they offered you the job of managing director!
 i) I really wish we married.
 j) I you didn't mind my phoning so late.

6

Rewrite each sentence so that it contains the word in capitals, and so that the meaning stays the same.

- a) Do you ever regret not going to university? WISH
Do you ever wish you had gone to university?
- b) I should really be leaving. TIME

 c) I'd rather have beer than wine. PREFER

- d) Jack doesn't know all the answers, though he pretends to. ACTS

- e) I'd love to be able to go with you to the opera. WISH

- f) I wish I hadn't sold that old painting. PITY

- g) It would be better if you didn't stay long. RATHER



- h) The management insisted on our wearing dark suits. WEAR

- i) Why do you have to complain all the time? WISH

- j) I don't want to go to the meeting. RATHER

7

Rewrite each sentence, beginning as shown, so that the meaning stays the same.

- a) It would be nice to be able to fly.
 I wish *I could fly!*
- b) I wish I hadn't heard that!
 I'd rather you
- c) Everyone wished they had listened more carefully to the lecture.
 Everyone regretted
- d) Unfortunately I've got to work late tonight.
 I wish
- e) Is it better for me to leave?
 Would you
- f) It's a pity I can't borrow your car.
 I wish you would
- g) We really must discuss this again.
 It's important that

- h) It's a pity you were driving so fast.
I wish you
- i) May the President live a long time!
Long
- j) Jack prefers me not to say anything about the missing money.
Jack would rather

8

Complete each sentence with a suitable word or phrase.

- a) It's time all of us were in bed.
- b) I'd rather you slowly and more carefully.
- c) may, I will always be on your side!
- d) I wish you the lecture instead of Professor Brown!
- e) Don't rush your decision. I'd rather you over.
- f) The authorities the money be paid at once.
- g) I wish I could at your party, but I was busy I'm afraid.
- h) Mary sometimes acts as if she either way what happened.
- i) What did about that problem we discussed?
- j) It's time I my way.