

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

A

Study this example situation:

Sarah wants to phone Paul, but she can't do this because she doesn't know his number. She says:

If I knew his number, I **would** phone him.

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



If I knew his number ...

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

- ☐ There are many things I'd like to do **if I had** more time. (but I don't have 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 pity he can't drive. It would be useful **if he 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 much.
- ☐ It's very crowded here. I **wish there weren't** so many people. (there are a lot of people)
- ☐ I **wish I didn't** have to work tomorrow, but unfortunately I do.

I wish I had an umbrella.



C

If I were / if I was

After **if** and **wish**, you can use **were** instead of **was** (**if I were** / **I wish it were** etc.).

If I was / **I wish it was** are also possible. So you can say:

- | | | |
|--|----|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> If I were you, I wouldn't buy that coat. | or | If I was you, ... |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'd go for a walk if it weren't so cold. | or | ... if it wasn't so cold. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I wish she were here. | or | I wish she 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** travel a lot. (*not* If I would be rich)
- ☐ Who **would** you ask **if you needed** help? (*not* if you would need)
- ☐ 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 41.

E

Could sometimes means 'would be able to' and sometimes 'was/were able to':

- ☐ She **could** get a better job (she **could** get = she would be able to get)
- ☐ if she **could** speak English. (if she **could** speak = if she was/were able to speak)
- ☐ I wish I **could** help you. (I wish I could = I wish I was able)

Could → Units 26–27 If I do / if I did → Unit 38
If I had known / I wish I had known → Unit 40 Wish → Unit 41

Exercises

39.1 Put the verb into the correct form.

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

39.2 Write a sentence with **if ...** for each situation.

- 1 We don't see you very often because you live so far away.
If you didn't live so far away, we'd see you more often.
- 2 It's a nice book but it's too expensive, so I'm not going to buy it.
I it if so
- 3 We don't go out very often – we can't afford it.
We more often
- 4 I can't meet you tomorrow – I have to work late.
If
- 5 It would be nice to have lunch outside but it's raining, so we can't.
We
- 6 I don't want his advice, and that's why I'm not going to ask for it.
If

39.3 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 computer (and I need one). I wish
- 3 Helen 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 get up early tomorrow (but I'd like to sleep late).
.....
- 8 I don't know anything about cars (and my car has just broken down).
.....
- 9 I'm not feeling well (and it's not nice).
.....

39.4 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 motorbike, more friends, lots of money etc.)
.....
- 3 (something you'd like to be able to do – sing, travel more, cook etc.)
.....
- 4 (something you'd like to be – beautiful, strong, younger etc.)
.....