CONDITIONAL SENTENCES IN ENGLISH

Conditional sentences exist in all (at least European) languages. A conditional sentence always consists of two parts: 1/ a condition and 2/ a result or consequence. Whether you place the condition first and the consequence second, or you do it the other way around, does not matter. In other words, "I'll call you if I have time" = "If I have time, I'll call you". Incidentally, this is absolutely the same in Bulgarian.

A/ There are four types of standard conditional sentences in English, usually numbered from 0 to 3 for learners' convenience.

Type 0: If the condition is there, the consequence is always there, too. This is 100% real, as the idea is that one thing always leads to another. Refers to all time, and is usually used for scientific truths or personal truths:

> **If you place water at above 100 degrees Celsius, it boils.**
> **If I have a headache, I never take a pill – I just go for a walk or have a small drink.**

Note that in both parts of the sentence we use the Present Simple tense, without introducing any future form. Again, this is because the consequence takes place every time the condition is present.

Type 1: Refers to the real future, and to a real possibility of something happening:

> **If I have some time tonight, I will call you for a chat.**

The above sentence means there is a 50% possibility that you will get a call from me tonight – depending on whether I have time or not. The possibility that I may not have time, however, is also there.

In the classic Type 1 conditional sentence, we use Present Simple for the condition and Future Simple (with "will") for the consequence. If you use another modal verb instead of "will", the probability decreases – i.e., in "If I have some time tonight, I may/might call you" is less certain, and less promising.

Type 2: Refers to an impossible, or highly unlikely condition-consequence sequence. Refers to the present or to life in general, but because of the non-existent or very low probability (0-1%) of this happening, makes use of past forms.

If I were you, I would not go there.
If you smoked less, you wouldn't cough so much.

0% real possibility in both cases: the FACT is that I am not and can never be you, so I can't control what you do, just hypothesise or give you advice. In the second sentence, the FACT is that you obviously smoke too much, that's why you cough a lot, and the situation is not subject to change at present.

If I ever won a million on the lottery, I would travel around the world.
What would you do if you saw a ghost?

Theoretically, there IS some minimal chance that I may win a million one day, but even die-hard lottery players don't really imagine that. And the second sentence is pure fantasizing – unless you absolutely believe that ghosts are all around us and are visible to the human eye.

This type of conditional sentence may also be used to discuss unpleasant situations which you don't want to imagine as being highly probable:

What would you do if you got mugged in the street / got cancer / found your partner was cheating on you / caught your child shooting heroin, etc.?

The standard formula is Past Simple for the condition and "would" instead of "will" for the consequence. This is a switch of "one tense back" to express the unreality.

Type 3: Absolutely unreal (0% probability), as it refers to past situations which can no longer be changed. Does not stop people from speculating or ruminating about how life could have been different, though.

If you had told me earlier, I would have been able to help you.
FACT: You didn't tell me in time, so wasn't able to help you.
If I hadn't fallen for his lies, I wouldn't have lost all my money in his wild schemes.
FACT: I did fall for his lies, and I lost all my money as a result.

Notice that there is a "one tense back" change again, from the tenses used to express the facts, or what actually happened: Past Perfect for the condition and "would" + have + PP for the consequence.

B/ There are also mixed conditional sentences, expressing either 1/ a past condition with a present consequence, or 2/ a general condition and a past consequence. Remember that you can mix only Type 2 and Type 3 (using the respective tenses), as these are also unreal!

If I hadn't studied English at university, I wouldn't be a teacher now.
FACT: I did study English (in the past), so I am a teacher (now).
If I was rich, I would have bought that painting at the auction last week.
FACT: I am not rich (in general), so I didn't buy the painting (last week).

C/ Finally, the same change of "one tense back" (from present to past) also occurs with sentences beginning with "I wish/If only", as these are also unrealistic wishes that cannot be realized at the present moment. (Consider the Bulgarian "Де да беше / можеше…").

I wish you were here.
FACT: But you are not here (now), so I am lonely.
I wish you had been here.
FACT: But you were not here (back then), so you couldn't help me.