

Unit 37 If and wish sentences (present)

a Study this example situation:

Tom wants to telephone Sue but he can't do this because he doesn't know her telephone number. He says:

If I knew her number, I would telephone her.

Tom says 'If I knew her number...'. This tells us that he doesn't know her number. He is imagining the situation. The real situation is that he doesn't know her number.

When you imagine a situation like this, you use a *past* tense ('I did/I was/I knew' etc.) after **if**. But the meaning is present, not past:

- Tom **would** travel **if** he **had** more money. (but he doesn't have much money)
- **If** I **didn't** want to go, I **wouldn't**. (but I want to go)
- We **wouldn't** have any money **if** we **didn't** work. (but we work)

b We also use the past for a present situation after **wish**. We use **wish** to say that we regret something, that something is not as we would like it to be:



I wish I knew Sue's telephone number. (I don't know it.)
Do you ever wish you **could** fly? (You can't fly.)
I wish it **didn't** rain so much in England. (It rains a lot.)
It's crowded here. I wish there **weren't** so many people. (there are a lot of people.)
I wish I **didn't** have to work. (I have to work.)

c In **if** sentences and after **wish** you can use **were** instead of **was**:

- 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 my room **were** larger. (or 'I wish my room **was** larger.')

d Do not use **would** in the **if** part of the sentence or after **wish**:

- If I **were** rich, I **would** buy a castle. (not 'if I **would** be rich')
- I wish I **were** taller. (not 'I wish I **would** be taller.')

But sometimes **I wish ... would ...** is possible. See **Unit 39**.

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

- She **could** (= would be able to) get a job more easily if she **could** (= was able to) type.

For **if** sentences and **wish** see also **Units 36, 38** and **39**.