How to Use the Subjunctive Mood

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The subjunctive mood of a verb describes imagined actions. The word **mood** is the medieval word **mood** and means **mode**. The subjunctive mood is a verb form and not a stylistic device.

Past Subjunctive

Use the past subjunctive in conditionals to imply that the condition has not happened, is not happening, or will not happen.

To Be

Were is the past subjunctive form of **to be**. In its subjunctive role, **were** describes the present and does not inflect for person or number:

> If Jones **were** there (now), I **would see** him (now).

Could, **should**, **might**, and **would** function as past tense or subjunctive forms of **can**, **shall**, **may**, and **will**.

Using **were**, you create a counterfactual conditional when you project one or both clauses into the present or the past. The only way that you can speak about imagined past or present actions is to say what has not happened.

The preceding example implies:

1. If Jones is there, I see him.

2. I do not see him.

3. Therefore, Jones is not there.

Projection in Time

The singular past tense speaks of a possible past:

> If he **was** there, I **did not see** him.

The singular present tense speaks of a possible present:

> If he **is** there, I **do not see** him.

The past subjunctive speaks of a counterfactual imagined present.

> If he **were** there, I **would see** him.

To speak counterfactually of the past, use the past perfect tense:

> If he **had been** there, I **would have seen** him.

To speak counterfactually of the future, pair **were** with the infinitive:

> If he **were to be** there (in the future), you **would know** (now) because his name **would be** on the guest list (now).

The following sentence is confusing:

> If he **were** there (now), I **would have seen** him (in the past).

The context in which this sentence occurs may clarify its meaning. Explicit clarification may be necessary:

> If he **were** there, I **would have seen** him by now.

> If he **were** there, I **would have seen** him because I was just there.

If both clauses of a conditional are projected into an imagined future, the conditional is hypothetical rather than counterfactual:

> If it **were to be**, I **would be** surprised.

The preceding sentence says no more than the indicative. Prefer it:

> If it **is to be**, I **will be** surprised.

Auxiliary With Other Verbs

Other verbs use the simple past tense to express the subjunctive. The mood of the consequent clause determines the mood of the condition:

> If he **ate** the poison, he **will/would die**.

For consistency with **to be**, use the past perfect tense to speak of a counterfactual past:

> If he **had eaten** the poison, he **would have died/would be dead**.

To speak of a counterfactual present, pair **were** with a participle or an adjective:

> If he **were poisoned**, he **would** show symptoms of poisoning.
>
> If he **were eating** the poison, he **would** be ill.
>
> If he **were dead**, he **would** not be breathing.
>
> If he **were dying**, the tests results **would** be positive.

To speak counterfactually of the future, pair **were** with the infinitive of the other verb:

> If he **were to be honored** (in the future), I **would know** (now) because the committee shares its decisions with me in advance.

Avoid using **were** as an auxiliary to speak of the hypothetical:

> If I **were to buy** that car, I **would pay** no more than $5000.
>
> If he **were to eat** the poison, he **would die**.

Use the past tense in the condition to express the hypothetical:

> If I **bought** that car, I **would pay** no more than $5000.
>
> If he **ate** the poison, he **would die**.

If you can express the same meaning with the indicative, prefer it:

> If he **ate** the poison, he **will die**.
>
> If he **eats** the poison, he **will die**.
>
> If he **eats** the poison, he **dies**.

Hypercorrection

In an episode of the situation comedy, *The Big Bang Theory*, the character of Leonard explains to the character of Penny that Richard Feynman was a famous physicist. Penny responds by saying,

> I don't care if he was a purple dragon that lived in my butt.

The character of Sheldon then tells Penny that, "You mean if he were a purple dragon. You forgot to use the subjunctive." Sheldon encourages Penny to hypercorrect because he knows that Richard Feynman was not a purple butt dragon. Sheldon assumes that Penny should be speaking counterfactually, but reality is not significant here. Penny's intent is. Consider the hypercorrection with the condition placed first:

> If he **were** a purple dragon that lived in my butt (in an imagined now), I **don't** care (in the real now).

The correct subjunctive version is:

> If he **were** a purple dragon that lived in my butt, I **wouldn't** care.

Penny uses the past tense in her original sentence because Richard Feynman is dead. To project the condition into the past, she should

use the past perfect in the condition:

> I **wouldn't** care (or **wouldn't have** cared) if he **had been** a purple dragon that lived in my butt.

Penny does not want to say something so lacking in force. Penny wants to say emphatically that she does not care in the real now. By committing to the indicative in her consequence, she is obliged to use the indicative in her condition. It is not always necessary to use the subjunctive mood to speak subjunctively. **Sheldon is wrong.**

Present Subjunctive

In the active voice, the present subjunctive form of a verb is the verb's infinitive without the preposition **to**. In the passive voice, the present subjunctive of **to be** is used as a linking verb with the past participle of the main verb.

Required Actions

Use the present subjunctive in restrictive clauses to describe required actions:

> I insist/require/order/desire/demand that she **examine** him.

> I insist/require/order/desire/demand that he **be examined**.

The present subjunctive does not inflect for person or number:

> I demand that **I/you/he/she/they/it examine** him.

> I demand that **I/you/he/she/they/it be examined**.

The equivalent indicative versions use inflected verbs:

> I demand that **I/you/they examine** him.

> I demand that **he/she/it examines** him.

I demand that **I am examined**.

I demand that **you/they are examined**.

I demand that **he/she/it is examined**.

Some of the indicative forms will confuse the reader. Consider the following sentence:

I insist that **they are examined**.

Is the speaker insisting that they have been examined, or is the speaker insisting that they be examined? To avoid ambiguity, use the subjunctive forms:

I insist that **they be examined**.

Questions and Statements

Prefer indicative present tense auxiliaries when asking and answering questions about imagined present or future actions:

Can he **be** trusted?

He **cannot be** trusted.

To ask a question about an imagined past, use a past tense auxiliary:

Could he **be/have been** trusted?

He **could be/have been** trusted.

Conditionals

When the subject of a condition is not the third person singular, and the condition describes actions that have not occurred, some writers use the present subjunctive when the verb is **to be**:

If I **be** quiet, **will** you tell me a story?

If you **be** respectful, he **will** answer your questions.

When the conditions describe actions that may have occurred, or the subject is the third person singular, this use of the present subjunctive is archaic:

If you **be** finished your dinner, you **can leave** the table.

If he **be** quiet, **will** you tell him a story?

Avoid mixing moods. Do not use the present subjunctive of any verb in conditions unless the conditions use a modal auxiliary. The mood of the auxiliary determines the mood of the clause:

If he **could be** trusted, I **would** give him the key.

If he **can see** me, he **will** wave a hand.

In other situations, indicative clauses are more lucid:

If I **am** quiet, **will** you tell me a story?

If you **are** respectful, he **will** answer your questions.

Special Cases

When you pair **as if** or **as though** with **to be**, use the appropriate mood. To mean **as if a situation were counterfactual**, pair **as if** or **as though** with the past subjunctive. To mean **as if a possible situation exists or existed**, pair **as if** or **as though** with the indicative:

Act **as if** you **were** intelligent.

Act **as if** you **are** intelligent.

If the mood of **were** is ambiguous because the subject is the second or third person, and the sentence is in the past tense, provide more information:

I treated those idiots **as if** they **were** intelligent.

The following example is not a conditional. You can see this if you reverse the clauses. The subordinate clause restricts the meaning of **asked** and expresses possibility. The indicative verb is correct:

> He asked me if I **was** intelligent.

In a restrictive clause, **it** can be paired with **were** if the restrictive clause describes a counterfactual situation:

> I wish that **it were** Friday.

> For humor, she pretends that **it were** possible that Richard Feynman had been a purple butt dragon.

I would rather and **I wish** can be paired with the present or past subjunctive. Both imply that the speaker wishes that the current situation were counterfactual. The present subjunctive additionally implies that the situation could change in the future:

> I **wish/would rather** that you **were/had been/be** promoted.

Suppose can be paired with the indicative or the past subjunctive. Stay in the same mood in subsequent clauses:

> Suppose that you **are** the king of the moon. What **will** you **do**?

> Suppose that you **were/had been** the king of the moon, what **would** you **do/have done**?