The third conditional — the grand finale of the conditional trilogy! This one deserves a detailed treatment because it's the most abstract of the three: talking about the *unreal past*, things that didn't happen and can't be changed anymore.

Third Conditional

When do we use it?

We use the third conditional to talk about **the unreal past** — imaginary situations in the past, and their imagined results. The condition did NOT happen, and the result did NOT happen. The door to the past is closed.

Compare the three conditionals:

Conditional	Time	Reality	Example
1st	Future	Real possibility	If it rains, I will take the umbrella.
2nd	Present/Future	Imaginary	If I were rich, I would buy a house.
3rd	Past	Impossible — it didn't happen	If I had studied, I would have passed.

Formation

If + past perfect (had + past participle), would have + past participle

> **If** she **had left** earlier, she **would have caught** the train. She missed it. We are imagining the opposite.

Negative forms:

> **If** I **hadn't been** so tired, I **wouldn't have made** that mistake. If he **had** listened, he **wouldn't have lost** his keys.

⚠️ **Common error 1:** « If I would have known… » ❌ → **If I had known…** ✅ Francophones often insert *would* in the *if*-clause, copying *si j'aurais su*. But in English, the *if*-clause never takes *would*. This is the single most frequent mistake — ***worth drilling.***

⚠️ **Common error 2:** Contractions can hide the structure. *If I'd known = If I had known*, NOT *If I would known*. Show students how to expand contractions to check themselves.

Word order variations

The two halves can swap positions; the meaning stays the same, but note the comma:

> She would have caught the train **if** she **had left** earlier. *(no comma)* **If** she **had left** earlier, she would have caught the train. *(comma)*

Alternative result words

Would is not alone — the third conditional also works with:

> **could have** (possibility): If I had had more time, I **could have** finished. M**ight have** (less certain): If you had told me, I **might have** helped. **Should have** (criticism/regret): If you'd seen the doctor sooner… — actually, *should have* also stands alone: You **should have** called!

Typical uses

- **Regrets:** *If I had learned English earlier, my career would have been different.*
- **Relief / narrow escapes:** *If you had taken that road, you would have been stuck in traffic for hours!*
- **Explanations of the past:** *Why didn't you come? — Because if I had come, I would have missed the baby's feeding.*

Exercises

Exercise A — Gap-fill: put the verbs into the third conditional.

1. If we _____ (leave) home earlier, we _____ (not miss) the ferry.
2. If she _____ (know) about the meeting, she _____ (come).
3. They _____ (buy) the house if it _____ (not need) so much work.
4. If I _____ (not oversleep), I _____ (catch) my train.
5. He _____ (be) angry if you _____ (tell) him the truth.
6. If the restaurant _____ (not be) full, we _____ (eat) there.
7. You _____ (pass) the exam if you _____ (revise) the irregular verbs.
8. If it _____ (not rain), the picnic _____ (be) a success.
9. I _____ (call) you if I _____ (have) your number.
10. If she _____ (wear) a coat, she _____ (not catch) a cold.

Exercise B — Rewrite: join the two sentences using the third conditional.

Example: She didn't study. She failed. → ***If she had studied, she wouldn't have failed.***

1. He didn't set his alarm. He was late for work.
2. We didn't book a table. We waited forty minutes.
3. I didn't see the sign. I took the wrong road.
4. She didn't water the plants. They died.
5. They didn't check the weather. They got soaked on the hike.

Exercise C — Find the error: each sentence contains one mistake. Correct it.

1. If I would have known, I would have called you.
2. If she had went to the doctor, she would have felt better.
3. If we had hurried, we would caught the bus.
4. He would have win the match if he had trained harder.

Exercise D — Speaking prompt: your turn.

Complete with your own ideas, then discuss:

1. If I had learned to play an instrument as a child, …
2. If I had studied something else, …
3. If I hadn't met my best friend, …
4. Think of one decision from the past year. How would today be different if you had decided the other way?

Answer key: A: 1 had left / wouldn't have missed · 2 had known / would have come · 3 would have bought / hadn't needed · 4 hadn't overslept / would have caught · 5 would have been / had told · 6 hadn't been / would have eaten · 7 would have passed / had revised · 8 hadn't rained / would have been · 9 would have called / had had · 10 had worn / wouldn't have caught. B: 1 If he had set his alarm, he wouldn't have been late · 2 If we had booked a table, we wouldn't have waited forty minutes · 3 If I had seen the sign, I wouldn't have taken the wrong road · 4 If she had watered the plants, they wouldn't have died · 5 If they had checked the weather, they wouldn't have got(ten) soaked. C: 1 would have known → **had known** · 2 had went → **had gone** · 3 would caught → **would have caught** · 4 would have win → **would have won**.

Can you formulate a 3rd conditional referring to the cat burglar?

“If only….