

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.



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:

- | | | |
|--|----|----------------------------------|
| ☐ If I were you, I wouldn't buy that coat. | or | If I was you, ... |
| ☐ I'd go for a walk if it weren't so cold. | or | ... if it wasn't so cold. |
| ☐ 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)