

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.

I wish I had an umbrella.



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)