



FRENCH · LEVEL 4

Lesson 4

The conditional: politeness, hypothesis and regret —
and the three SI systems

● Formation

● Politeness

● Past conditional

● SI systems

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INTRODUCTION

The “would” mood

The **conditionnel** is French's equivalent of your “would”: *Je viendrais* — I would come. It expresses an action that is not certain — possible, wished for, or dependent on a condition.

Two uses dominate, and the second you'll need on day one: the **hypothesis** and **politeness**. The gap between *Je veux un café* and *Je voudrais un café* is the gap between “I want a coffee” and “I'd like a coffee” — except that in French the polite form is far more compulsory than in English.

One warning that concerns you specifically: English “would” does two jobs. It marks the conditional (*I would buy a house*) but also past habit (*every summer we would go to the sea*). **French uses the conditional for the first and the imparfait for the second.** Confusing them is the classic English-speaker error.

Chapter 1 — The present conditional

Chapter 2 — When it is used

Chapter 3 — The past conditional

Chapter 4 — The three SI systems

Chapter 5 — Exercises

Lessons 2 and 3 are prerequisites: the *passé composé* and *imparfait* must be solid.

CHAPTER 1

The present conditional

Good news after Lesson 3: the endings are exactly those of the imperfect. The only new thing is the stem, taken straight from the infinitive.

1 Infinitive plus the imperfect endings

Take the verb in the **infinitive** and add **-ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient**.
Parler → *je parlerais, tu parlerais, il parlerait, nous parlerions, vous parleriez, ils parleraient*.

The essentials : You already know the endings from Lesson 3. Only the stem changes.

2 Verbs in -RE drop the E

Third-group infinitives in **-RE** lose the final E: *prendre* → *je prendrais* · *attendre* → *j'attendrais* · *écrire* → *j'écirais*.

Spelling quirk : The reason is phonetic: *prendreais* would be unpronounceable.

3 The five main irregulars

être → *je serais* · **avoir** → *j'aurais* · **aller** → *j'irais* · **faire** → *je ferais* · **voir** → *je verrais*. The stem is irregular, the endings never change.

Watch out : Note: *ils iraient*, not “*iriaient*” — a frequent written mistake.

4 Four more you will need

pouvoir → je pourrais · **vouloir** → je voudrais · **devoir** → je devrais · **venir** → je viendrais. These four underpin polite French.

Priority : *Je voudrais, Pourriez-vous, Tu devrais* — the three most useful phrases in the language.

5 Don't confuse it with the future

The simple future also builds on the infinitive, but with the endings of *avoir*: *je parlerai* (I will speak) versus *je parlerais* (I would speak).

Classic trap : One letter apart, and barely distinguishable by ear. In writing it decides the meaning.

The nine irregular stems

être → ser- · avoir → aur- · aller → ir- · faire → fer- · voir → verr-
pouvoir → pourr- · vouloir → voudr- · devoir → devr- · venir → viendr-

To each stem add: -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient

Nine stems cover nearly everything you will meet.

What really matters

- Stem = infinitive, endings = those of the imperfect.
- Verbs in -RE drop the final E: *prendre* → *je prendrais*.
- Careful in writing: -ai is future, -ais is conditional.

CHAPTER 2

When it is used

Four uses, two of which you'll need within an hour of landing in Paris. Politeness is by far the commonest — the French use it constantly.

1 Polite requests

The use that changes your daily life: *Je **voudrais** réserver une chambre* — I'd like to book a room · *Nous **souhaiterions** réserver une table* · *Pourriez-vous m'aider ?*

More compulsory than in English : English tolerates “I want a coffee” among friends. French does not: *je veux un café* sounds like an order. Always *je voudrais*.

2 Advice

*Tu **devrais** étudier pour ton examen* — you should study for your exam · *Vous **devriez** consulter un médecin.*

Direct equivalent : This is your “should”: the conditional of *devoir* softens advice into a suggestion.

3 Hypothesis or uncertain action

*Je **viendrais** vous voir* — I would come and see you (but it's not settled) · *Ce **serait** une bonne idée.*

Core meaning : The action is possible but unconfirmed. Same value as your “would”.

4 Wishes

J'aimerais voyager en Espagne — I would like to travel to Spain · *Ce serait merveilleux.*

The nuance : *Aimer* in the conditional is exactly your “would like” — softer than *je veux*.

5 Unconfirmed information

In the media: *Le président serait arrivé à Paris* — the president has reportedly arrived in Paris. The journalist reports without vouching.

For reading : English uses “reportedly” or “is said to”; French simply switches to the conditional.

The three phrases to learn first

Je voudrais... — I'd like (ordering, requesting)

Pourriez-vous... ? — could you... ? (polite request)

Tu devrais / Vous devriez... — you should (advice)

These three phrases make you sound civil in any situation.

What really matters

- Politeness is the commonest use: *je voudrais*, never *je veux*.
- French requires the polite form far more systematically than English.
- In the news, the conditional flags unconfirmed information.

CHAPTER 3

The past conditional

The tense of regret and reproach: what could have happened and didn't. The form is simple once the passé composé is solid.

1 How it is formed

The auxiliary (*avoir* or *être*) in the **present conditional** + past participle:
*J'**aurais** voulu · Je **serais** allé · Nous **aurions** fait.*

Link to Lesson 2 : This is your “would have” — with the extra French complication of two auxiliaries.

2 Unrealized action

*J'**aurais voulu** devenir actrice* — I would have liked to become an actress (but it didn't happen) · *Je **serais allé** en France* — I would have gone to France, but never did.

Core meaning : The action stayed in the past and never took place. Hence the flavour of regret.

3 Regret and reproach

*Tu **aurais dû** me le dire* — you should have told me (reproach) · *J'**aurais pu** t'aider* — I could have helped you.

Memorize these : *Aurais dû* = should have · *aurais pu* = could have. The two commonest regret phrases in French.

4 Don't confuse the two forms

Je mangerais une glace — I'd have an ice cream (now or later) versus *J'aurais mangé une glace* — I would have had an ice cream, but couldn't.

The test : Present conditional looks forward; past conditional looks back at something that never happened.

5 Unconfirmed information in the past

As in the present: *L'accident aurait fait trois blessés* — the accident reportedly left three people injured.

For reading : Standard news phrasing when the facts aren't confirmed.

The two forms compared

Conditionnel présent — Je viendrais · now or later, the action is still possible

Conditionnel passé — Je serais venu · in the past, the action did NOT happen

Je mangerais une glace (I fancy one) versus *J'aurais mangé une glace* (I couldn't)

Present = still possible. Past = no longer.

What really matters

- Past conditional = auxiliary in the conditional + past participle.
- It expresses an unrealized action, regret or reproach.
- Aurais dû = should have · aurais pu = could have.

CHAPTER 4

The three SI systems

Everything comes together here. Three patterns cover every conditional sentence in French — and the first rule is the one English speakers break most often.

1 The golden rule: never a conditional after SI

After **SI** the conditional never appears. What follows is the present, the imperfect or the pluperfect — depending on the system.

Rule number one : English breaks this rule constantly (“if I would have known”). French never does — and neither should you.

2 System 1: real condition

SI + present + future. *Si j'ai le temps, je viendrai* — if I have time, I'll come. The condition is perfectly possible.

It matches : Identical to English: “if I have time, I will come” — present after if, future after the comma.

3 System 2: present hypothesis

SI + imperfect + present conditional. *Si j'avais beaucoup d'argent, j'achèterais une maison* — if I had a lot of money, I would buy a house.

It matches too : Also identical to English: “if I had... I would buy”. Past tense after if, would in the second half.

4 System 3: unrealized past

SI + pluperfect + past conditional. *Si j'avais su, je serais venu* — if I had known, I would have come.

Regret : French builds the pluperfect with the auxiliary in the **imperfect** + participle: *j'avais su, j'étais allé*.

5 The table that settles it

First decide when the condition sits: **possible now** → system 1 · **unreal now** → system 2 · **missed in the past** → system 3.

The method : The two halves always travel together — never mix parts from different systems.

The three systems at a glance

1. SI + présent → futur : Si j'ai le temps, je viendrai. (real)
2. SI + imparfait → conditionnel présent : Si j'avais de l'argent, j'achèterais une maison. (unreal now)
3. SI + plus-que-parfait → conditionnel passé : Si j'avais su, je serais venu. (missed past)

Never a conditional straight after SI. Never.

What really matters

- Three systems, three pairs of tenses — the halves never mix.
- After SI: présent, imparfait or plus-que-parfait. Never the conditional.
- System 2 is the commonest in everyday speech.

CHAPTER 5

Exercises

Do them without looking at the answers. The SI systems are learned only by writing full sentences.

1 Form the present conditional

1. parler (je) 2. prendre (tu) 3. être (il) 4. avoir (nous) 5. aller (ils)
6. pouvoir (vous)

Answers : 1. je parlerais · 2. tu prendrais · 3. il serait · 4. nous aurions ·
5. ils iraient · 6. vous pourriez

2 Make the sentence polite

1. Je veux un café. 2. Vous pouvez m'aider ? 3. Tu dois partir. 4.
J'aime visiter Paris.

Answers : 1. Je voudrais un café. · 2. Pourriez-vous m'aider ? · 3. Tu
devrais partir. · 4. J'aimerais visiter Paris.

3 Which SI system?

1. Si j'___ (avoir) le temps, je ___ (venir) demain. 2. Si j'___ (avoir)
beaucoup d'argent, j'___ (acheter) une maison. 3. Si tu ___ (étudier),
tu ___ (réussir) l'examen l'an dernier.

Answers : 1. ai / viendrai (system 1) · 2. avais / achèterais (system 2) ·
3. avais étudié / aurais réussi (system 3)

4 Present or past conditional?

1. J'____ (aimer) devenir actrice, mais c'est trop tard. 2. J'____ (aimer) voyager cet été. 3. Tu ____ (devoir) me le dire hier. 4. Tu ____ (devoir) te reposer un peu.

Answers : 1. j'aurais aimé (too late) · 2. j'aimerais (still possible) · 3. tu aurais dû (reproach) · 4. tu devrais (advice)

5 Translate into French

1. I'd like a tea. 2. If I had time, I would come. 3. You should have told me. 4. If I had known, I wouldn't have gone.

Answers : 1. Je voudrais un thé. · 2. Si j'avais le temps, je viendrais. · 3. Tu aurais dû me le dire. · 4. Si j'avais su, je ne serais pas allé.

How to work through this lesson

Day 1: read the lesson and do the exercises without looking at the answers.

Day 3: redo exercise 3 — the three systems need repetition.

Day 7: write five sentences about what you would do if you won the lottery.

The lottery is the ideal exercise: the whole of system 2 in one short text.

What really matters

- Polite phrases are learned as fixed blocks, not built from scratch.
- Never a conditional after SI — the mistake English speakers make most.
- “Would” for past habit is the imparfait, not the conditional.

CONCLUSION

What you can do now

What you can do now

- ☐ Form the present and past conditional of any verb
- ☐ Make a polite request instead of sounding like you're giving an order
- ☐ Give advice with devoir in the conditional
- ☐ Express regret about something that never happened
- ☐ Handle the three SI systems without breaking the golden rule

To practise this week

- ☐ Order something aloud with Je voudrais, ten times, until it's automatic
- ☐ Write five sentences about what you'd do with a lot of money
- ☐ Redo exercise 3 without looking at the answers

What comes next

- ☐ The cheat sheets — dans and à, the partitive, EN and Y, the subjunctive — download separately from domaformalis.com
- ☐ For conversation practice with a teacher, get in touch

The five things not to forget

1. Stem = infinitive, endings = those of the imperfect.
2. Nine irregular stems cover nearly everything.
3. Je voudrais, never Je veux — that is French politeness.
4. Past conditional = something that could have happened and didn't.
5. Never a conditional straight after SI.

With these five points you command one of the most useful moods in French.

This lesson follows and expands the course of Yasmine, a French and Spanish teacher based in Sofia. The explanations have been extended with the three SI systems and completed with corrected exercises.

To go further, find the **cheat sheets** on Domaformalis, and get in touch if you'd like live lessons with a teacher.

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