

The Third Conditional

Pre-activity: “I will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor

Listen to the chorus of this famous song from the disco era. Circle the “if clauses” (1) and underline the main clauses (2).

I should have changed that stupid lock, I should have made you leave your key
 If I'd known for just one second you'd be back to bother me
 Go on now, go, walk out the door
 Just turn around now
 'Cause you're not welcome anymore
 Weren't you the one who tried to hurt me with goodbye
 Do you think I'd crumble
 Did you think I'd lay down and die?

What is the tense/form of the verb phrases in the “if clauses”?

What is the tense/form of the verb phrases in the main clauses?

Past Unreal Conditionals

Past unreal conditionals describe past actions that did not happen (are not true), and a possible result of that action that did not come true.

Conditional Type	“If clause” tense	Main clause tense
Past Unreal Conditional (third conditional)	Past perfect (had + en-form)	Would have Could have Should have Might have

The “if clause” describes an alternative situation that did not happen in the past, and the main clause tells an imagined, possible result of that situation:

If she had known that he'd come back, she would've changed the lock.
 (But, she did not know, so she did not change the lock.)

If he had studied a bit harder, he would've been able to get into Harvard.
 (But, he didn't study hard, so he did not get into Harvard)

Typically, this form expresses *regret*:

If you'd have taken better care of the plants, they wouldn't have died!

If he had been a better boyfriend, she wouldn't have dumped him.

In the main clause, you can use “could have” or “might have” to describe things that would have been possible if the event in the “if clause” happened:

She might have passed the test if she hadn't skipped class so much.

He could've come with us if he had completed all his work on time.

You can use “should have” to give advice about the past. Note that for “should have,” you don't need an “if clause.” The “if clause” is implied to be something like “If (subject) could have...”.

You should have gone to the shop earlier. Now the line is really long!

He shouldn't have drunk that much alcohol. He got really sick.

Additionally, you do not need to include the “if clause” when using “would have,” “could have,” or “might have” if the meaning of the “if clauses” is clear from context:

Hanako: Yesterday, I had so much trouble with my HW. It was so hard.

Min: Oh, I would've helped you. You should've told me.

Exercise 1: Regrets – Using the past unreal conditional, write three things that you would've done if something had been different.

Exercise 2: Choose a famous person that you admire. If you had met one of these people, what would you have asked them?

Listen to a few songs that have the third conditional. Pay attention to the verb phrases in the “if clauses” and main clauses:

“If I knew you were coming, I’d’ve baked a cake” by Eileen Barton

If I knew you were comin' I'd 've baked a cake,
baked a cake, baked a cake.
If I knew you were comin' I'd 've baked a cake.
How-ja do. How-ja do, How-ja do.
Had you dropped me a letter I'd 've hired a band,
grandest band in the land.
Had you dropped me a letter I'd 've hired a band
and spread the welcome mat for you.

← Notice the non-standard usage of the simple past tense here. You may hear this informally, though it is not that common.

“You should’ve said no” by Taylor Swift

You should've said no, you should've gone home
You should've thought twice before you let it all go
You should've know that word, bout what you did with her
Would get back to me
And I should've been there, in the back of your mind
I shouldn't be asking myself why
You shouldn't be begging for forgiveness at my feet
You should've said no, baby and you might still have me

“It could’ve been you” by Journey

We were so close yet so far away
I'd reach out, you'd be gone
Moments that still take my breath away
There's so much more to life than loving you
You don't need me, no...

[Chorus:]

I can't wait all my life, on a street of broken dreams
It could have been you my love (where are you now)
Oh I...still wonder if you remember the night
It could have been you

Song Activity: "Shoulda, Woulda, Coulda" by Brian McKnight

Listen...

Baby can you put them _____ down,
Just wait, hold on for a minute?
Gotta say a couple _____ before you go,
Even though I know that we're _____.
I don't want you to leave without knowing,
Just where I'm _____ from. Babe.
Just wanna say I made a big mistake,
And now I gotta face the fact that I...

Chorus

_____ been a better man,
The kind of man that you needed.
Woulda been better off,
If I'd _____ right by you.
_____ done this, _____ done that, but I know I can't go back,
'Cause now it's just too late,
I'm saying shoulda, woulda, coulda. Yeah

I can tell by the _____ on your face,
You ain't trying to hear what I'm saying.
Maybe you done heard all of this before too,
Girl this ain't no game that I'm playin'.
This may be the last _____ I'll ever have,
To talk to you before you go.
So I gotta say, I _____ a big mistake.
Girl you know it's killing me, that I...

(Chorus)

I should have _____ my best to love you. Baby.
I should have _____ no one above you.
And now it's _____ me more than you know,
Letting you go.
That's why I...
Girl I know that I shoulda...
Coulda been a better man to you baby.
Shoulda been there for yah, every time you needed me, every time you called me.
And you that coulda done this, coulda done that ... yeah,
But now I can't go back baby.
All I need to now is, girl all I need to know is,
Do you still _____ me like you used to, baby?
All the things I could have done,

All the things I should have done,
Saying shoulda, woulda, coulda, yeah...

Softly
Coulda been a better man to yah baby...

Extension Activity

1. What is the meaning of this song? How does Brian McKnight feel?
2. Imagine that you are in Brian McKnight's situation. What should (or could) you have done to prevent your significant other from leaving you?