Verbs: Mood

25.1 WHAT MOOD IS

The mood of a verb or verb phrase indicates your attitude toward a statement as you make it. Do you think of it as a statement of fact? Then you will use the indicative mood. Do you think of it as a command? Then you will use the imperative. Do you think of it as a wish, a recommendation, or an imaginary condition? Then you will use the subjunctive.

25.2 USING THE INDICATIVE

The indicative mood is for statements of actuality or strong probability:

- The spine-tailed swift flies faster than any other bird in the world.
- The Missouri and Mississippi Rivers rose to record heights in 1993.
- Midwesterners will remember the flooding for many years to come.

Use do, does, or did with the indicative for emphasis.

25.3 USING THE IMPERATIVE

The imperative mood is for commands and requests made directly.

1. Use the bare form of the verb for commands addressed entirely to others:
   - Vote for change.
   - Fight pollution.
Be yourself.

Kindly send me your latest catalog.

2. When a command or suggestion includes yourself as well as others, use *let us* or *let’s* before the bare form of the verb:

*Let us negotiate* our differences in a spirit of mutual trust and respect.

*Let’s cooperate.*

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**25.4 USING THE SUBJUNCTIVE: MODAL AUXILIARIES**

The subjunctive mood is for statements of hypothetical conditions or of wishes, recommendations, requirements, or suggestions. To express the subjunctive, you often need one of the modal auxiliaries, which include *can, could, may, might, must, ought, should,* and *would.* Use them as follows:

1. **Use can to express**
   - **Capability:** Can the Israelis and the Palestinians ever make peace?
   - **Permission:** Why can’t first-year college students live off campus?

   In formal writing, permission is normally signified by *may* rather than *can,* which is reserved for capability. But *can* may be used informally to express permission and is actually better than *may* in requests for permission involving the negative. The only alternative to *can’t* in such questions is the awkward term *mayn’t.*

2. **Use could to express**
   - **The object of a wish:** I wish I could climb Mount Everest.
   - **A condition:** If all countries of the world could set aside their antagonism once every four years, the Olympics would be truly international.
   - **A distinct possibility:** A major earthquake could strike California within the next ten years.

   On the distinction between *would* and *could,* see item 8 below.

3. **Use may to express**
   - **A mild possibility:** The next president of the United States may be a woman.
PERMISSION: Students who cannot afford tuition may apply for loans.

4. USE MIGHT TO EXPRESS

A REMOTE POSSIBILITY: Biogenetic experiments might produce some horribly dangerous new form of life.

THE RESULT OF A CONTRARY-TO-FACT CONDITION: If I had driven all night, I might have fallen asleep at the wheel.

5. USE OUGHT TO EXPRESS

A STRONG RECOMMENDATION: The Pentagon ought to eliminate waste in defense spending.

LIKELIHOOD: The new museum ought to be ready by next fall.

Ought is normally followed by the infinitive.

6. USE MUST TO EXPRESS

AN ABSOLUTE OBLIGATION: Firefighters must be ready for action at any hour of the day or night.

A FIRM CONCLUSION: William Bligh, who sailed a small boat nearly four thousand miles, must have been an extraordinary seaman.

7. USE SHOULD TO EXPRESS

ADVICE: Students who hope to get into medical school should take biology.

EXPECTATION: By the year 2050, the population of the world should exceed eight billion.

8. USE WOULD TO EXPRESS

THE RESULT OF A CONDITION OR EVENT: If a one-kiloton neutron bomb were exploded a few hundred feet over the Earth, it would kill everyone within a radius of three hundred yards.

THE OBJECT OF A WISH: Some people wish the federal government would support them for the rest of their lives.

Both would and could may be used to express the object of a wish. But “I wish you could go” means “I wish you were able to go”; “I wish you would go” means “I wish you were willing to go.”
MISUSING MODAL AUXILIARIES

Avoid putting two or more modal auxiliaries together:

- I might could move to Calgary.
- [or] I might could move to Calgary.

USING THE SUBJUNCTIVE: SPECIAL VERB FORMS

The subjunctive mood is sometimes indicated by a special verb form instead of by a modal auxiliary.

1. The present subjunctive is the same in form as the bare form (infinitive form) of the verb, and it is the same with every subject. Use the present subjunctive to express a hope, a requirement, a recommendation, a demand, a request, or a suggestion:
### Subjunctive Mood

#### Indicative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God has mercy on us.</th>
<th>God have mercy on us!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The queen lives.</td>
<td>Long live the queen!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A premed student normally takes biology.</td>
<td>The college requires that every student take first-year English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The toxic dump is still open.</td>
<td>Protesters demand that the dump be closed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The trustees’ meetings are closed.</td>
<td>The students demand that those meetings be open.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The present subjunctive of the verb *be* is *be* with every subject (dump *be* closed; meetings *be* open).

2. **The past subjunctive** is the same in form as the common past, except that the past subjunctive of *be* is *were* with every subject. Use the past subjunctive to express a wish for something in the present:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicative (Fact)</th>
<th>Subjunctive (Wish)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have five dollars.</td>
<td>I wish (that) I had a hundred dollars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a pauper.</td>
<td>I wish (that) I were a millionaire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am taking Math 36.</td>
<td>I wish (that) I were taking Math 23.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I live in Ottawa.</td>
<td>I wish (that) I lived in Vancouver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am in New York.</td>
<td>I wish (that) I were in Texas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is summer.</td>
<td>I wish (that) it were winter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **The past perfect subjunctive** is the same in form as the common past perfect. Use it to express a wish for something in the past:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicative (Fact)</th>
<th>Subjunctive (Wish)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I saw the second half of the game.</td>
<td>I wish (that) I had seen the first. [or] I wished (that) I had seen the first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was there for the second half.</td>
<td>I wish (that) I had been there for the first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had no binoculars with me.</td>
<td>I wish (that) I had had them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A conditional sentence normally consists of an if clause, which states a condition, and a result clause, which states the result of that condition. The mood of the verb in the if clause depends on the likelihood of the condition.

THE POSSIBLE CONDITION

If the condition is likely or even barely possible, the mood is indicative:

[condition] If electric cars replace gas-powered cars in our cities, [result] urban air will be much cleaner than it is now.

THE IMPOSSIBLE OR CONTRARY-TO-FACT CONDITION

If the condition is impossible or contrary to fact, the mood of the verb in the if clause is subjunctive, and the result clause usually includes a modal auxiliary, such as would or might. The tense of the verb in the if clause depends on the tense of the condition.

1. A condition contrary to present fact should be stated in the past subjunctive:
   
   If the federal government spent no more than it collected, interest rates would plunge.
   
   If I were a millionaire, I would buy an airplane.
   
   The new clerk acts as if he were the owner.
   
   The expression as if always signals a condition contrary to fact. Some writers now use was instead of were in sentences like the second and third, but in formal writing you should use were.

2. A condition contrary to past fact should be stated in the past perfect subjunctive:

   After the fight, the former champion looked as if he had been put through a meat grinder.
   
   If Montcalm had defeated Wolfe in 1759, the Canadian province of Quebec might now belong to France.
MISUSING WOULD HAVE IN CONDITIONAL CLAUSES

Avoid using *would have* to express a condition of any kind:

*If I *would have* attended the meeting, I would have attacked the proposal.

Use *would have* only to express the *result* of a condition:

**EDITED:** If I had attended the meeting, I *would have* attacked the proposal.