

Subjunctive in English · A Brief Introduction

MOODS OF THE VERB

The *subjunctive* is a *mood* of the verb. The mood (or mode) of a verb has to do with its relationship to reality. There are three moods in both English and German:

Indicative

The *indicative* mood is employed to show reality. the indicative can be expressed in present, past, remote past, future, and general-truth time. The indicative mood has several sets of tenses.

Imperative

The *imperative* mood is the form of the verb that indicates a command or suggestion. There is no tense or time associated with the imperative in English or German.

Subjunctive

The *subjunctive* mood of the verb indicates a degree of removal from reality. Hypothetical situations and ideas contrary to fact are frequently expressed in the *subjunctive mood*. A speaker employs the *subjunctive* to report events or ideas that s/he considers to be removed from reality to some degree. The *subjunctive* can also remove the directness with which the speaker reports events and ideas. The *subjunctive* has only a limited number of tenses. The subjunctive reports events and ideas in either *past time* or *non-past time*.

SPECIFIC USES FOR THE SUBJUNCTIVE

irreal situations / hypothetical situations that didn't or won't take place

I would take you to Berlin. but I don't have an airplane.
If it rained, we could go to a film.
I would buy a new computer, but I don't have any money.
If I bought a new computer, would you pay for it?
If you had come over, I would have made some coffee.
If they had seen the film, they would know what we are talking about.

polite requests

Would you please bring me a cookie?
Would you guys speak a little slower, please?
Would you please close the window?
Would you stop the noise now, please?

wishes

He wishes he would get better grades.
I wish I knew the answer.
I wish I would have won the lottery.
I wish you wouldn't have left the party so soon.

act as if + verb

They *act as if* they had slept too little.
We don't want to *act as if* we were stupid.
She *acts as if* nothing bothered her.
Justin pretended *as if* he hadn't gotten the lowest grade on every exam.

FORMS OF THE ENGLISH SUBJUNCTIVE IN NON-PAST TIME

Use a past form of the verb in a non-past context.

If we went to the mountains this weekend, we might run into some snow.
I wish you had a little more time for me.
He acts as if he knew everything.
If you came over later, I might make some coffee.

Use the substitute verb “*would*” then add the infinitive of the lexical verb.

We would take a bike ride tomorrow, but the weather is going to be bad.
It’s always very noisy in the library, otherwise I would study there more often.
Would you help me with this problem, please?
We would visit our relatives in Germany more often, but it cost too much to fly there.

Use the subjunctive of a modal verb then add the infinitive of the lexical verb.

The subjunctive forms of the following verbs are given in parentheses
can (*could*) · shall (*should*) · may (*might*) · will (*would*)

I might come to your party if you invite some of my friends, too.
You should know that answer by now, we practiced that problem three times already.
Could you help me on the weekend if you have time?
I might feel better if I quit smoking so much.
You should see that film soon.
We could stay home and make a pizza instead of going out.

FORMS OF THE ENGLISH SUBJUNCTIVE IN PAST TIME

Use *had* plus the participle of the lexical verb.

If we had gone to the mountains last weekend, we would have run into some snow.
I wish you had had a little more time for me yesterday.
If only I had known the answer to the last question, I would have aced the test.
Had I known that earlier, I wouldn’t have dumped so much money into the stock market.

Use “*would have*” plus the participle of the lexical verb.

We would have taken a bike ride last Friday, but it was much too windy.
You didn’t tell me you were going to be in the library, otherwise I would have met you there.
Would you have gone with me to the picnic if I had invited you?

Use the subjunctive of a modal verb then add “*have*” plus the participle of the lexical verb.

I might have come to your party, but you didn’t invite any of my friends.
You should have known the answer, we studied that problem for the last exam.
Could you have helped me last weekend if I had given you a call?
I might have told you something that turned out to be untrue.
You should have seen that film while it was still here.
We could have stayed home and baked cookies, instead we ended up going out for a drink.

COMPARISONS BETWEEN SUBJUNCTIVE AND INDICATIVE

Subjunctive - The speaker indicates that the actions are somehow removed from reality.

If it <u>rained</u> , we <u>would go</u> to a film.	hypothetical situation
I wish you <u>knew</u> her name.	wish
We <u>would have called</u> you this weekend, but we went out of town.	contrary to fact
<u>Would</u> you please <u>turn down</u> the music?	polite request

Indicative - The speaker believes the actions to be true and real (past, present, and future)

When it <u>gets</u> dark, we <u>will go</u> to a film.	this is a condition, but it is based in reality
I'm glad you <u>know</u> her name.	
We <u>called</u> you this weekend, but you were not home.	
<u>Will</u> you <u>turn down</u> the music now, please!	more direct than in the subjunctive

Remember that the subjunctive mood is used to express:

- **irreal situations (situations contrary to reality)**
- **hypothetical situations that didn't or won't take place**
- **polite requests**
- **wishes**
- **act as if+ verb**

(S) = subjunctive (example verbs are underlined)

(I) = indicative (verbs that contrast with the subjunctive are underlined)

- (S) I would exercise every day, but I don't have time. (contrary to fact, hypothetical)
(I) I exercise every day, because the doctor recommends it. (reality)
(S) We would have taken some flowers to Grandma, if we had visited her. (not real)
(I) We took some flowers to Grandma when we visited her. (reality)
(S) She acts as if she owned the company. (not real, *acts as if*)
(I) She owns the company. (reality)
(S) Would you close the door please? (polite request, toned down)
(I) Will you close the door please? (reality, question posed in future tense)
(S) I could read the report to you, if I had my glasses. (hypothetical situation)
(I) I can read the report to you, now that I have my glasses. (reality)
(S) Do you wish you were more wealthy? (wish)
(I) Is it good that you are more wealthy? (reality)

TRAPS ! – ENGLISH SUBJUNCTIVE HIDDEN IN RAPID SPEECH

In spoken English, the subjunctive is used quite often. However, many speakers speak so quickly that the subjunctive forms become extremely condensed and sometimes hidden. Here are examples of some of the most common contractions that hide subjunctive forms in English.

<i>I'd've</i>	I'd've gone home, but I wasn't tired yet.	(I <u>would have gone</u> home, but ...)
<i>should've</i>	We should've stayed longer.	(We <u>should have stayed</u> longer.)
<i>would've</i>	That would've been a good film, but it was too long.	(That <u>would have been</u> a good film, but ...)
<i>could've</i>	I wish I could've come to your party.	(...I <u>could have come</u> to your party.)