

Overview of Tenses in Narrative

		<u>tense</u>	<u>aspect</u>
1.	<i>Last night</i> , two men <u>broke</u> into my house.	past	
2.	They <u>tried</u> to open the safe,	past	
3.	but they <u>had forgotten</u> to bring a flashlight	past	perfect
4.	so they <u>turned on</u> some lights.	past	
5.	Some neighbors <u>saw</u> them	past	
6.	and <u>phoned</u> the police.	past	
7.	Then the men <u>got</u> hungry.	past	
8.	They <u>were eating</u> ,	past	progressive
9.	when the police <u>arrested</u> them.	past	
10.	<i>Later today</i> , ...		

I took the child to the clinic. The doctor examined him for a long time very carefully. Finally he pronounced him healthy. (Michael Sharwood Smith 1988:228)

Oprah Winfrey began speaking publicly in church when she was only two. She got her own TV talk show in 1986. She had already been a TV news reporter and had made her acting debut in the movie *The Color Purple*. Her TV show quickly became one of the most popular shows in the United States.

Bowdrie built his fire of dry wood to eliminate smoke. Earlier, crossing the plains, he had killed an antelope. Now he cut steaks and began to broil them. He knew better than to relax. (L'Amour 1984: 144)

- a. When they ***had eaten*** dinner, they talked about future plans.
- b. When they ***ate*** dinner, they talked about future plans.

I drew the curtains apart. The sun was shining. The children were playing in the yard. Some women were hanging clothes on the washing lines. (Michael Sharwood Smith 1988:228)

The prison guard ran to the wall. Two convicts were climbing to the top. Another was already jumping down to the other side. (Michael Sharwood Smith 1988:229)

The “future-in-the-past”. The “future-in-the-past” is to show, as the term suggests, future plans and future expectations set in the past. Notice, for instance, that in the example Martina's future expectations are indicated by the construction was going to...

On Friday afternoon Martina Rodriguez got off work early. She drove home. As she drove, she made some plans for the weekend. She was going to wash her car; she was going to drive up to Yosemite; and, she was going to take a long relaxing walk along her favorite hiking trail. But she was too tired so instead she stayed home and caught up on her sleep.

Another way of indicating the “future-in-the-past” is with would... With would... a past setting (*she thought...*) is combined with a future expectation or plan (...*that she would drive up to Yosemite*).

...As she drove, she made some plans for the weekend. At first, she thought she would drive up to Yosemite, but then she realized that she wouldn't have time.

Note that if the tense of *was/were going to...* and *would...* is changed, we have *is/am/are going to...* and *will...*

Notice that the example describes a generalization, not an actual event.

Bill *plays* video games.

Simple present.

In addition to generalizations, the simple present can also report actual *states* existing at the moment of speaking.

Do you see the bug near the table?

I *feel* tired.

The soup *tastes* a little too sour.

Conditionals: What they are and how one might present them.

The future — facts or fantasy?

For students, the conditionals present one of the more difficult areas of English grammar. The patterns of the conditionals have their own complexities, but with a little work the students ultimately learn the patterns. However, learning how to use each of these patterns presents a continuing difficulty.

The first pattern to be learned, of course, is the so-called first conditional, that is, sentences of the form *If I eat any more, I'll get sick*. The verb in the dependent clause is in the simple present, while the verb in the main clause is in the future tense.

Students often learn this pattern when they learn the future tense. The pattern occurs in sentences about the future like *When I get home, I'll give you a phone call*.

After the first conditional has been learned, it is necessary to contrast it with the second conditional, that is, sentences of the form *If I jumped off this roof, I would probably break my leg*. The verb in the dependent clause is in the simple past, while the verb in the main clause typically contains *would* or *could* plus the simple verb root.

Unfortunately, the second conditional is also sometimes called the past conditional. For students, the term past conditional is particularly misleading since the second conditional has nothing whatsoever to do with past time.

Nonetheless, with some work, the students also learn the pattern for the second conditional. Now comes the difficult part — teaching students to differentiate the meanings of the first and the second conditional.

Part of the teaching, of course, can be done by explaining the meanings. Roughly, we use the first conditional, which uses *will* and *can* in the main clause, to talk about things we expect to happen. Of course, we might be wrong — what we expect doesn't always happen.

And, we use the second conditional, which uses *would* and *could* in the main clause, to fantasise, that is, to talk about how things would be if the world were different.

Most of the teaching, however, requires illustration through the use of clear examples. For differentiating the first and second conditionals, one of the clearest examples we know of involves playing an interactive game of tic-tac-toe with one of the students in your class.

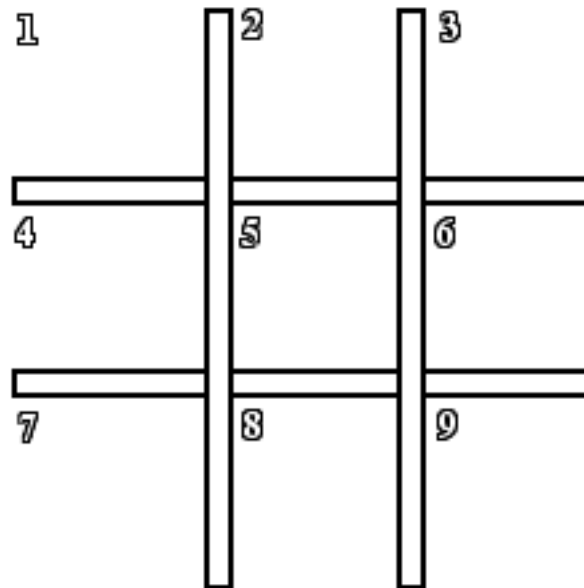
Before starting, however, it is crucial that the students understand how to play the game. Undoubtedly, most already do, but for those who don't the whole point of the exercise will be lost unless they are shown how to play first. So, take a minute or two and teach them how to play.

Begin the language teaching by picking out a student in the back of the class to play tic-tac-toe against.

As you play tic-tac-toe with the student, ask questions about what the student will do and about what you will do. Ask the student, "Where will you put your 'X'?" Ask the other students, "Where will I put my next 'O'?"

Sometimes students will answer, "I don't know." If they do, use the opportunity to teach them, "I think he will..." or "I guess he will..."

Continue working with the first conditional until the students are comfortable with it.



Once the class is comfortable with the first conditional, it is time to slip in the second conditional. Do this by asking questions such as, "If you were me, where would you put your next 'O'?" and "If you were (the student player), where would you put your next 'O'?" Notice that these questions are in the second conditional.

When students are asked what they would do, the correct answer is something like, "(If I were you,) I would put it in square 4." Frequently, however, students answer, "I'll put it in square 4." But, the *will* is wrong! *Will* is only used to describe what is about to happen!

Would is the right answer, because the answer is hypothetical. The students were asked what they would do, if they were playing, not what they will do.

It takes the students a little while to catch on, but eventually they realise that *will* is used to describe what the teacher or the student player is about to do. The *would* is used when they hypothesise.

For almost every class, it is quite useful to put sample questions as well as sample answers up on

the board before the game begins so that the students can use them as models during the lesson.

The homework focuses on the same distinction. The first part of the essay asks the students to fantasise about what they would do if they were given a million dollars to spend next year. Naturally, they should use the second conditional with its *would* or *could* in this section.

The second part of the essay asks the students to describe what they will really do this year — since it is highly unlikely that anyone is going to give them a million dollars to spend. Naturally, they should use the first conditional with its *will* or *can* in this section.

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Instructions: Finish writing the two incomplete paragraphs in the essay below. The first is about what you would do if you were given a million dollars to spend this year. Remember that you will not really be given a million dollars to spend this year — will you? The second is about what you will really do next year.

The future: facts and fantasy

If I were suddenly given a million dollars to spend this year, I would do many things that I cannot afford to do now. For instance, _____

However, because no one is really going to give me a million dollars, what I will actually do this year is quite different. Probably, _____

“The Fool”

One has to be considerate and tactful throughout his life. That *is* a great pity. Only very exceptional people *can* afford to be frank. Great poets and emperors *dare to be* frank, basing their daring on their true or imagined superiority. “You *are* all fools, and you *lead* your life in vain” is what is said by those who *don't care* if they *are thought* to be eccentric or fools themselves.

In the Middle Ages there *was* a recognized profession of frank men: the fools of the royal court. They *got* their room and board by being frank even to the point of telling a proud Lear that he *was* a fool.

I am sorry the trade of the smart fools *has been abolished*. I *would certainly apply* for a job if the profession *were* still extant, and I *would be* a perfect fool, if I *could*. Wouldn't it be useful for modern statesmen to have around some earthly fool like myself, expressing his honest opinions and making fun of their vanity? My opinions *would be* very scientific as any modern fool's *would have* to be and I *would commute* between the great capitals of the world in my private jet.

Instead, I must get a job as a secretary this summer. If my boss *says* something stupid, everyone *expects* me to say, “Yes, sir.”

One can not afford to be frank if one is to work and earn his bread. That *was* the privilege of only a few in the not-so-dark Middle Ages.