THE SUBJUNCTIVE

The subjunctive and 'unreal' uses of past forms

- We use the subjunctive form in certain fixed expressions and after some verbs and adjectives which express the idea of necessity, importance, etc.
- The subjunctive form can be used to refer to events and situations in the past, present or future.
- We use it mostly in formal and literary language.

After certain expressions we can also use past tenses to refer to the past, present or future, to describe things which are seen as 'unreal' or unlikely. This is similar to the use of past tenses in conditionals (+ Unit 10). In this unit we look at the way we use past tenses after particular expressions and to express preference and necessity.

1) The subjunctive form is the same as the infinitive (without to).
2) It does not show any marking for tense and can be used to refer to events in the past, present or future.
3) We use it most often in that clauses after certain verbs (for example: **advise, ask, demand, insist, propose, recommend, request, suggest**), and after adjectives (for example: **advisable, anxious, desirable, eager, essential, important, necessary, preferable, vital, willing**), to **express the idea that something is necessary or important**:

The verb to 'be' has an alternative subjunctive form were which is sometimes called the past subjunctive and is used to talk about the imagined present or future and in conditionals.
The subjunctive is **used in reported speech**, very formal language (e.g. regulations, legal documents) and in poetry:
She insisted that she pay her own way.
We require that all receipts be submitted to the committee for approval.

the idea that something is necessary or important:

At yesterday's hearing the judge insisted (that) Mr Grant give evidence despite his relationship to the accused.

In future cases it will be vital that each party give full disclosure prior to trial.

We can use passive and negative forms of the subjunctive:

Members of the committee suggested England be excluded from future international tournaments.

Regulations require that officers not enter the crime scene without protective clothing.

- As the use of the subjunctive is rather formal or literary in British English (it is less formal and more common in US English), British English speakers prefer to use should + infinitive or the forms listed below in most situations:

It is vital that every applicant complete the form in triplicate. (subjunctive)

It is vital that every applicant should complete the form in triplicate. (should + infinitive)

It is vital that every applicant completes the form in triplicate. (present simple)

It is vital for every applicant to complete the form in triplicate. (for + subject + to + infinitive)

There are some **fixed expressions** which use subjunctive forms:

If he doesn't want to see us, then so be it. (= then let it happen)

Bless you!

Long live the republic!

'There's very little chance of winning this case.' 'Be that as it may, I'm not going to give up fighting: (= Whether that is true or not, l'm not ...)

I'll take it all the way to the Supreme Court if need be. (= if this is necessary)

THE 'UNREAL' PAST

After a number of expressions, like if only, we use past tenses (active and passive) to describe **things in the present, past or future which are imagined or unreal**. We sometimes refer to this use of past tenses as the 'unreal' past.

If only I was rich. (= I am not rich but I would like to be rich.)

- Other introducing expressions like if only are: It's time ..., What if Suppose/Supposing..., would rather, would sooner, as if, as though, wish.

- We can use the past simple or the past continuous after these expressions to talk about the imaginary present and future:

Present: It's time they were forced to clear up the mess. (They aren't being forced to clear up at the moment.) These kids act as if they owned the place. (They don't own it.)

Future: I wish I were coming with you tomorrow. (I am not coming with you tomorrow.)
- We use the past perfect to refer to something unreal in the past:

Suppose the gun had been fired at me? (The gun wasn't fired at me.)
I wish l had never started this course. (I have started it.)

Many speakers prefer to use were for all persons when talking about the imagined present or future, especially in more formal situations and in US English. This form is sometimes called the past subjunctive and is also used in second conditional sentences*:*

Suppose I were to announce my candidacy at the next council meeting.
If only he were a little more convincing on the economic issues.
If I were you, l would think twice before refusing that offer.
(In the above examples we can also use "was" but this is more informal.)

We use it's time... to say that something is not happening, and it should be:
It's time we left. (= We aren't leaving, and we should.)
It's about time you paid a visit to your grandparents. (= You should visit them.)
It's high time that the voice of the people was heard in this House. (= Their voice isn't being heard and it should be.)

Note that we can also use **it's time to + infinitive** or **it's time for + object + to + infinitive**:
I'm afraid it's time to put your books away now, children.
Come on everybody. It's time for us to get on the coach.

We use what if, suppose/supposing (that) with the past simple or continuous to ask what if, suppose/supposing (that) questions about an imaginary situation in the present or future and its possible consequences. These questions have similar form and meaning to those in second conditional sentences

Suppose he asked you to marry him, what would you say? (= If he asked you to marry him, what would you say?)

Sentences with these expressions describing an imaginary situation in the past have a similar meaning to third conditional sentences.

Supposing your parents had refused, how would you have felt? (= If your parents had refused, how would you have felt?)

And what if he had been thrown out by the landlord? Where would he have gone?

We often use what if, suppose and supposing to make suggestions:

Suppose you paid the bill for once?

We use a present tense after these expressions to ask about an imaginary situation in the future that we think is likely or probable, or if we want to suggest that it is:

What if the plan doesn't work?

Supposing he gets caught at customs? You know how vigilant they can be.

Would, rather/would, sooner

We use would rather/sooner with the past simple to describe preferences:

I'd sooner you gave me a cash refund. A credit note's no use to me. (= I would prefer a refund/l wish you would give me a refund.)

They are often used as a polite way to give/refuse permission, or make suggestions:

I'd rather you didn't smoke in here.

I'm not keen on the idea of staying in. I'd sooner we went out clubbing or something.

If the person expressing a preference and the subject of the preference are the same we use an infinitive instead of the past tense. Compare:

We'd sooner you spent your bonus on something useful. (past tense: speaker and subject are not the same)

I'd rather spend it on something frivolous. (infinitive: speaker and subject are the same)

as if/ as though

We use the past simple after as if or as though to say that how something appears now does not match with reality:

He talks to the children as though they were imbeciles. (The speaker knows they aren't imbeciles.)

They are acting as if nothing had happened. (The speaker knows something has happened.)

But we use a present tense (including the present perfect) after as if or as though to describe how things seem or appear when there is a possibility that the appearance reflects something real:

He sounds as if he knows what he's talking about. (= Perhaps he does know.)

You look as though you haven't eaten for days. (= You may not have eaten.)

We can use these expressions to be critical, ironic or sarcastic:

It isn't as if he's in any position to pass judgement! (= He probably isn't in a position to do this.)

WISHI IF / ONLY

wish/if only + past simple

We use I wish **if only + past simple** to express a desire for something to be different in the present:

I/ wish I had more free time. (= I don't have much free time, but I would like some.)

The desire can be for something which is actually impossible:

If only I were young again.

We use wish **if only + past perfect** to express a regret about the past, a wish that wish if only something different had happened:

+ past perfect

I wish that you'd told me about this before I booked the tickets. (= I regret the fact that you didn't tell me about this.)

If only he hadn't been driving so fast! (= Unfortunately, he was driving very fast.)

if only + would

Wish/if only + would usually expresses a desire for someone to change their deliberate behaviour in the present or future:

I wish you'd stop looking at me

I wish you'd stop looking at me like that. It's terribly distracting.

like that. It's terribly distracting.

(= You keep looking at me and I want you to stop.)

We often use this form to criticise or complain about something:

I wish you'd stop shouting. I'm not deaf you know.

We can also use the form with inanimate subjects because although we know they have no conscious control over their actions (they are not human), we give them human characteristics for emphatic effect:

If only the sun would come out so we could get on with the filming. (= The sun 'refuses' to come out. I want it to come out.)

The change we desire must be possible, even if unlikely. We cannot use would for an impossible change, e.g. one which the subject has no control over or a change to the past:

I wish sports cars wouldn't be so expensive. (Cars have no control over their price.) v I wish sports cars weren't so expensive.

If only nuclear bombs wouldn't have been invented. (a change to the past) v If only nuclear bombs hadn't been invented. (+ past perfect →)

We can't use would when the subject of the wish and the subject of the change are the same. Instead, we use a past tense, or could:

x I wish / would be more energetic. (Subject of wish and would are the same.) v If only I were more energetic.

v I wish I could be more energetic.