

Imagining what would happen if

French B1 (intermediate) · Lesson

Quick answer: To make a hypothesis in French, use *si* + imparfait in the condition and the conditional in the result: *Si j'avais le temps, je voyagerais*. This expresses an unlikely or imaginary situation. Never put the conditional right after *si*. For a real possibility, use *si* + présent + futur.

Level: French B1 (CEFR intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B1, Spoken production

How do you make a hypothesis with *si* in French?

A hypothesis has two parts: the condition after *si* and the result. The tenses depend on how real the situation is. For an imaginary or unlikely situation, French uses the imperfect after *si* and the conditional in the result.

Si + imparfait
(the imaginary condition)

conditionnel présent
(the imagined result)

Si j'avais un mois libre,

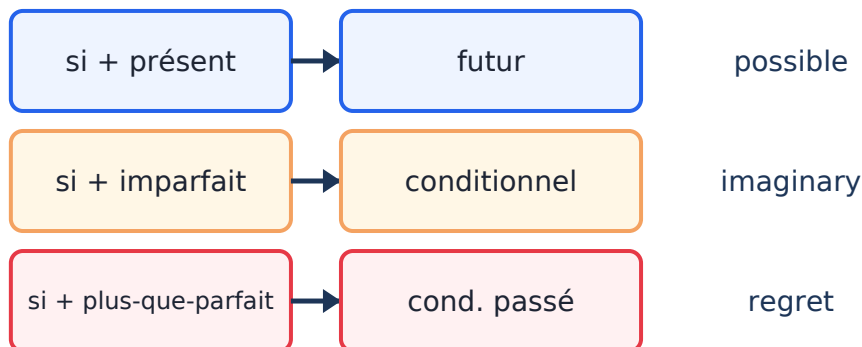
je partirais à Tahiti.

Never: *si* + conditionnel

Imaginary hypothesis: si + imparfait, conditionnel présent.

Rule: the three *si* sentences

Si + present, future: real possibility. *Si* + imparfait, conditional: imaginary or unlikely. *Si* + plus-que-parfait, past conditional: regret about the past. The conditional never follows *si*.



Choose the pattern according to how real the situation is.

Examples

- Si Nadia a le temps demain, elle viendra. — If Nadia has time tomorrow, she will come. (real)
- Si Nadia avait le temps, elle viendrait. — If Nadia had time, she would come. (but she hasn't)
- Si Nadia avait eu le temps, elle serait venue. — If Nadia had had time, she would have come. (past regret)

How do you form the conditional?

Take the future stem and add the imperfect endings -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient. Regular verbs use the infinitive, and -re verbs drop the final e.

Verb	Stem	je / nous
voyager	voyager-	je voyagerais, nous voyagerions
vendre	vendr-	je vendrais, nous vendrions
être	ser-	je serais, nous serions
avoir	aur-	j'aurais, nous aurions
aller	ir-	j'irais, nous irions
faire	fer-	je ferais, nous ferions
pouvoir	pourr-	je pourrais, nous pourrions
vouloir	voudr-	je voudrais, nous voudrions

Watch out

English says "If I *would* have time, I *would* come". French never repeats the conditional: Si j'avais du temps, je viendrais. Wrong: Si j'aurais du temps.

How do you use the conditional for dreams, advice and politeness?

- Dreams: Si je gagnais à la loterie, j'achèterais une maison à Annecy.
- Suggestion: Et si on partait au Sénégal cet hiver ? — What if we went...?
- Advice: À ta place, je parlerais au directeur. — If I were you, I would talk to the director.
- Polite request: Je voudrais un renseignement. / Pourriez-vous répéter ?

Culture note

French journalists use the conditional to report unconfirmed news: Le ministre aurait démissionné means "the minister has reportedly resigned". It tells the reader that the information is not yet certain.

Zoé's tip

Say the sentence in two halves: "Si + imparfait" is the dream, the conditional is the picture of it. If you hear -rais after si, stop and change it to -ais.

Key points to remember

- Imaginary hypothesis: si + imparfait, then conditionnel présent.
- Real possibility: si + présent, then futur.
- The conditional is the future stem plus -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient.
- Never use the conditional directly after si: si j'aurais is wrong.
- Et si on partait ? suggests an idea; À ta place, je... gives advice.

Imagining What Would Happen If: frequently asked questions

Which tenses do I use after si for an imaginary situation?

Use the imparfait after si and the conditionnel présent in the result: Si j'étais riche, j'achèterais un bateau. The two verbs describe a situation that is not real.

Can I put the conditional after si?

No. Si never takes the conditional, in any type of hypothesis. Say Si j'avais, not Si j'aurais.

How do I form the conditional of irregular verbs?

Use the same stem as the future and add imperfect endings. For example, être gives serais, aller gives irais and pouvoir gives pourrais.

What does Et si on... mean?

Et si on partait demain ? is a suggestion: 'What if we left tomorrow?'. The verb after si is in the imparfait.

How do I talk about a regret in the past?

Use si + plus-que-parfait and the past conditional: Si j'avais su, je serais venu. It shows what would have happened but did not.