

Real and imaginary situations with si

French 3 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: A French si clause has two parts. For a real or likely situation, use si + present with a present, future or imperative result: Si tu viens, nous jouerons. For an unlikely or imaginary situation, use si + imparfait with the conditional: Si j'avais le temps, je voyagerais. Never put a future or conditional right after si.

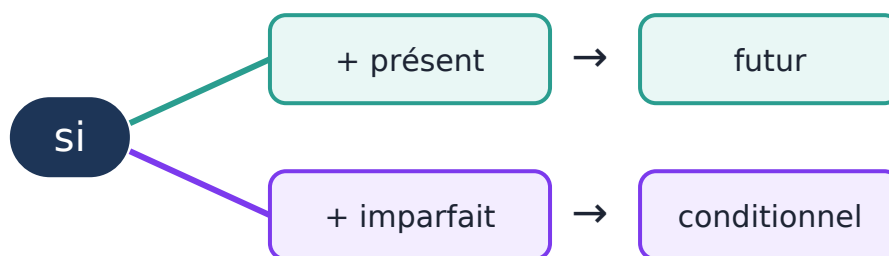
Level: French 3 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Low) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Low, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

What is a si clause?

Definition

A *si* clause (*if* clause) states a condition. The **main clause** tells the result. French pairs the tenses in two fixed patterns, which depend on how likely the condition is.

Situation	Si clause	Result
Real, likely	si + présent	présent, futur or impératif
Imaginary, unlikely	si + imparfait	conditionnel présent



Two patterns after si.

How do you talk about real possibilities?

When the condition is likely, use the present after si. The result is usually the future, but it can be a present fact or a command: S'il neige demain, nous irons à la patinoire. — If it snows tomorrow, we will go to the ice rink. Si tu as faim, mange un sandwich ! — If you are hungry, eat a sandwich! Si l'eau bout, elle devient vapeur. — If water boils, it turns to steam.

How do you talk about imaginary situations?

When the condition is unlikely or only imagined, use the *imparfait* after *si* and the conditional in the result. Form the imparfait from the nous form without -ons: avoir → j'avais, être → j'étais, aller → j'allais, faire → je faisais.

Examples

Si j'**habitais** à Tahiti, je **nagerais** tous les matins. — If I lived in Tahiti, I would swim every morning.

Si Lina **pouvait**, elle **viendrait** à Québec avec nous. — If Lina could, she would come to Québec with us.



The more unlikely, the more the verbs move back one step.

Rule

The clauses can swap places: Nous jouerons si tu viens. Put a comma only when the *si* clause comes first. Before *il* and *ils*, *si* becomes *s'il* and *s'ils*: *s'il pleut*, *s'ils arrivent*.

Watch out

English speakers often copy *if I will* or *if I would*. In French, *Si je serai* and *Si j'aurais* are wrong: say *Si je suis* and *Si j'avais*. Also, *si elle* and *si on* keep the full word.

Zoé's tip

The "r" lives in the result clause, never in the *si* clause. *Si* + simple tense, then the verb with the r: future or conditional.

Culture note

S'il vous plaît is itself a *si* clause: literally, *if it pleases you*. Every polite request in French contains a tiny condition.

Key points to remember

- Real or likely: si + present, then present, future or imperative.
- Imaginary or unlikely: si + imparfait, then the present conditional.
- Si never takes the future or the conditional directly after it.
- Si becomes s'il and s'ils before il and ils, but never before elle or on.
- The two clauses can swap places; keep the comma only when si comes first.

Real and Imaginary Situations with Si: frequently asked questions

Which tenses do you use with si in French?

For a real or likely condition, use si + present and a result in the present, future or imperative. For an imaginary one, use si + imparfait and the conditional in the result.

Can you use the future after si?

No. In a conditional sentence, si is followed by the present or the imparfait, never by the future or the conditional. Say Si tu viens, not Si tu viendras.

When does si become s'il?

Si drops the i before il and ils: s'il pleut, s'ils arrivent. It stays si before elle, elles, on and every other word.

How do you form the imparfait for the si clause?

Take the nous form of the present, remove -ons and add -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient. The only exception is être, which uses the stem ét-: j'étais, nous étions.

Does the order of the clauses matter?

No. Si tu viens, nous jouerons and Nous jouerons si tu viens mean the same. Use a comma only when the si clause comes first.