

Would have, could have, should have in French

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: The French past conditional (*conditionnel passé*) names an action that would have happened but did not. Build it with the conditional of *avoir* or *être* plus a past participle: *j'aurais mangé, elle serait partie*. It answers *si* + *plus-que-parfait* and voices regret or reproach.

Level: French 4 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Mid) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Mid, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational, WL 4.1 Language Comparisons

What does the past conditional express?

Definition

The *conditionnel passé* describes something that would have happened in the past if the situation had been different. Since the condition was never met, the action did not take place. It usually translates English *would have* + *participle*, and also *should have* and *could have*.

Awa missed the bus to a soccer match in Dakar: *Si j'avais pris le bus de 7 h, je serais arrivée à l'heure.* — If I had taken the 7:00 bus, I would have arrived on time.

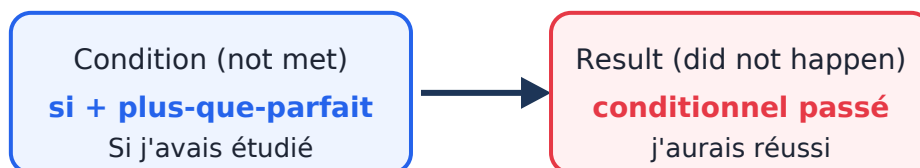
How do you form the past conditional?

Rule

Use the conditional of *avoir* or *être* (the stem of the future plus the endings of the imperfect) and add the past participle. Verbs of motion that take *être* and all pronominal verbs make the participle agree with the subject.

Subject	With avoir: finir	With être: partir
je	j' aurais fini	je serais parti(e)
tu	tu aurais fini	tu serais parti(e)
il / elle	il aurait fini	elle serait partie
nous	nous aurions fini	nous serions parti(e)s
vous	vous auriez fini	vous seriez parti(e)(s)
ils / elles	elles auraient fini	ils seraient partis

How does si + plus-que-parfait work?



Either clause can come first.

Two clauses, two compound tenses: the condition looks back, the result never happened.

Examples

- Si Kofi avait révisé, il aurait réussi l'examen. — If Kofi had studied, he would have passed the exam.
- Nous serions allés à Québec si le vol n'avait pas été annulé. — We would have gone to Québec if the flight had not been canceled.
- Si tu m'avais écrit, je t'aurais répondu. — If you had written to me, I would have answered you.

How do you voice a regret or a reproach?

Put *devoir*, *pouvoir* or *vouloir* in the past conditional and follow with an infinitive.

French	Meaning
Tu aurais dû m'appeler.	You should have called me. (reproach)
Vous auriez pu m'avertir.	You could have warned me. (reproach)
J' aurais voulu voir ce match.	I would have liked to see this game. (regret)

La réalité

Nina a oublié son maillot.
Elle n'a pas joué.

Ce qui aurait pu être

Elle aurait dû vérifier son sac.
Elle aurait joué.

Regret compares reality (solid box) with the imagined past (dashed box).

Watch out

English speakers say *if I would have known*, but French never allows a conditional right after *si*: write *Si j'avais su*, not *Si j'aurais su*. After *aurais dû* the verb stays an infinitive: *Tu aurais dû partir*, not *dû parti*.

Culture note

French newspapers often use the past conditional for facts not yet confirmed: Le ministre aurait quitté Paris hier soir. — The minister reportedly left Paris last night.

Zoé's tip

Spot the pair: avais / étais after si, aurais / serais in the other clause. If you see aurais on both sides, rewrite the first one!

Key points to remember

- Formation: conditional of avoir or être + past participle (j'aurais fini, nous serions partis).
- Unreal past condition: si + plus-que-parfait in one clause, conditionnel passé in the other.
- Never put a conditional right after si: say si j'avais su, not si j'aurais su.
- Aurais dû, aurais pu and aurais voulu + infinitive express reproach, missed chance and regret.
- Être verbs and pronominal verbs make the participle agree with the subject.

Would Have, Could Have, Should Have in French: frequently asked questions

How is the French past conditional formed?

Take the conditional of avoir or être (aurais, serais, aurait...) and add the past participle. Choose être for motion verbs such as aller and partir and for pronominal verbs, and make the participle agree with the subject.

Which tenses go with an unreal condition in the past?

Use si + plus-que-parfait in the condition and the conditionnel passé in the result: Si j'avais su, je serais venu. Never use a conditional right after si.

How do you say 'should have' in French?

Use the past conditional of devoir followed by an infinitive: tu aurais dû partir means you should have left. Aurais pu means could have, and aurais voulu means would have liked.

When does the participle agree in the past conditional?

It agrees with the subject after être (elle serait partie, ils se seraient perdus). After avoir it agrees with a direct object placed before the verb, as in la lettre qu'il aurait écrite.

Does the past conditional have a use other than regret?

Yes. Journalists use it to report unconfirmed facts: le directeur aurait démissionné means the director has reportedly resigned. The same form can also soften a past request.