What is the difference between "If" and "Unless"

ETAP 550- CED

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What is the same and what is different?

▶ "If" and "unless" are both conjunctions. They connect two sentences or clauses.

▶ They are both used to give a condition.

▶ It does not matter the order of the conditional clause and the result clause.

▶ "Unless" has the same meaning as "if…not" or "except if…".

    ▶ The sentence patterns are the same as "if" sentences.

▶ "Unless" is used to express negative conditions and must be used with an affirmative verb in order to avoid double negation.

▶ Unless + affirmative verb = if + negative verb

(Convoenglish.com, 2013)

Why are conditional sentences so confusing?

- Each conditional statement has an if-clause/ unless-clause and a result clause.

- These clauses then can be real, unreal, imaginary or hypothetical and are dependent on what will happen if the circumstance in the first clause happens.

- Now throw into the mix that you can have zero, first, second, and third conditionals where the verbs in the conditional clause and main clause vary depending on what conditional type we are using.

"If" used in conditional sentences

If I am sick, I will go to the doctor.

('if' clause)   (result clause)

o The 'if' clause is an event or situation that **must** happen in order for other things to happen.

o The result clause can only happen if the 'if' clause occurs and this is why these type of sentences are referred to as conditional sentences.

IF

An **if** phrase expresses that one action or situation must happen first before the other one will/can happen. The action in the clause following **if** expresses either: (1) a condition for a singular outcome to occur; or (2) a recurring situation "whenever" with a predictable outcome (in general).

MAIN CLAUSE 2ND ACTION	IF CLAUSE 1ST ACTION
DESIRED OUTCOME	A PARTICULAR CONDITION
You will have a tender turkey	**if** you cook it slowly.
You will have a tough turkey	**if** you overcook it.
We'll arrive at 8:00	**if** our train is on time.
We'll bring some champagne	**if** you wish.

"Unless" is used to express negative conditions

Unless is used in sentences that say _A will happen if it is not stopped by B_.

I'll be at your place at 9:00 unless the bus is late.

However, you cannot use unless in sentences that say _A will result from B not happening_.

Ex. I'll be angry unless the bus is on time.

UNLESS "EXCEPT IF"

An **unless** phrase expresses "an action or situation will happen if the other one *does not* happen first" or "an action or situation *won't happen* if the other one happens first." **Unless** expresses "except if" or "if not" (See polarity[1], +positive or –negative wording.)

MAIN CLAUSE 2ND ACTION	UNLESS CLAUSE 1ST ACTION
+ / – OUTCOME	+ / – PARTICULAR CONDITION
(+) You will have a tender turkey	**unless you overcook it.** (–)
(–) You won't have a tender turkey	**unless you cook right.** (+)
You will have a tough turkey	**unless you cook it slowly.**
We'll arrive at 8:00	**unless our train is late.**
We'll bring some champagne	**unless you object.**

(Sevastopoulos, 2013)

Rules to change "if not" to "unless" and vice versa

RULE #1- when *if* is on the action side of the sentence

If + not = unless

If you don't study, you will fail.

action   result

Unless you study, you will fail.

If you don't come, the party will be boring.

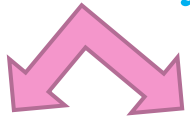Unless you come, the party will be boring.

How do we change this example?

If you don't eat your dinner, you will not get dessert.

(Camp Edutech, 2015)

Rule #2- reverse

Unless = If + not

Unless you work hard, your project will be rejected.

If you don't work hard, your project will be rejected.

How do we change this example?

Unless you get enough sleep, you will be tired.

(Camp Edutech, 2015)

Rule #3- exception Where there are negatives on both sides

If + not + not = Unless + not

If you don't study, you won't succeed.

Unless you study, you won't succeed.

If Mary doesn't sing well, she will not win the trophy.

Unless Mary sings well, she will not win the trophy.

How do we change this example?

If John can't get a ride, he won't make it to the concert.

(Camp Edutech, 2015)

Let's try some examples

Think about what rule you would use to change "if" to "unless" in each sentence and visa versa.

If + not = Unless   Unless = If + not   If + not + not = Unless + not

1. If you don't hurry, you will miss the bus.

2. Unless you have permission, you can't leave.

3. If I am not invited to the party, I will not go.

4. Unless he wears glasses, he can't see.

5. If Kelly doesn't have enough money, she can't buy her car.

6. If you don't leave immediately, I will call the police.

References

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Sevastopoulos, J. (2021). If vs. Unless: Express a particular condition for a desired outcome. Retrieved from http://www.grammar-quizzes.com.