

Reality Check

by

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Writing is a way to communicate reality, and one of the hardest things about clear writing is that reality itself isn't always clear. It's a fact that we simply can't know everything about everything. Which is where "if" comes in, the tiny but powerful little word we use to acknowledge that life is uncertain.

The future is always iffy because it hasn't happened yet:

If the plane is on time, we'll be in by noon.

(The plane might be on time.)

Even the past, which we've already experienced, isn't always clear. Again, "if" lets us report a past event when what is being reported *might* have happened:

If she was at the workshop, she forgot to sign in.

(She may have been there.)

Now, if your mama taught you right, you know there's a difference between things that might be true, and things that are wishful, impossible, or downright false. And even though mama said not to make things up, sometimes that little "if" allows us to do just that – as long as we admit it. We do this by following "if" with the verb form "were":

If I were you, I'd ask for a raise.

(Impossible. I am not you.)

If John were in charge, we'd take the whole summer off.

(Wishful. Sadly, John is not in charge.)

If that meeting were today, I'd be there.

(Untrue. The meeting is not today, and I know it.)

The rule is really quite simple. When an "if" clause could possibly be true, use a regular verb form. When an "if" clause is wishful, impossible, or is a big fat lie, use "were". This tells your readers that you know your grammar, and also suggests that you are still in touch with reality.