Conditional sentences can seem very confusing. Grammar-books introduce a plethora of different terms and different languages express different types in similar but crucially different ways. But there are actually rather few types you will commonly meet, and even fewer that you will translate wrongly. Learn the forms for just four types soundly, and you will be able to translate most examples you find.

The following table gives the English of the four most important types to understand:

	Real	**Unreal**
past		If I had seen you, I would have said hello
present		If I was at home now, I would be drinking a cup of tea
future	If it rains tomorrow, I'll take an umbrella	If I won the lottery I would buy a car

I have divided the table into **real** and **unreal** types. Different grammar books introduce different terms which correspond to the same distinction, for example ‘fulfilled’ vs. ‘unfulfilled’, ‘open’ vs. ‘remote’.

The terms you use aren’t terribly important - what’s more vital is that you understand the difference between these two types, which you will best do by considering their **meaning**.

The difference between the left and the right column is essentially a question of **likelihood**. The **unreal** conditionals either describe a situation which is contrary to fact, or which is unlikely to happen. So, I **didn't** see you, I am **not** at home now, and I'm **unlikely** to win the lottery. The **real** conditional, on the other hand, is perfectly likely to come true (as I write this in England). It is a real possibility that it will rain.

Importantly, we may see that the distinction in **meaning** is reflected in the **form**: the unreal conditionals are all marked by the word 'would' in the *apodosis* (the 'then' clause).

By understanding the difference between these two columns, we may also see why I have left the past and present **real** cells of my table empty - they aren't particularly common. Whereas past unreal conditionals are used to speculate about something which didn't happen, past real conditionals speculate about things which **have** happened. Sentences using this construction are not very plausible. For example:

If they met last week (which they did), then they became fast friends (which they did)

We do find sentences like these in 'whodunnits', often when a claim about the past is being thrown into doubt:

If he was with his wife last night (which he claims but which I very much doubt), then someone would have seen him.

Similarly present real conditionals will be speculating about situations which are actually true, and are therefore quite rare. For example:

If I am writing this on a computer (which I am), I am like most writers in the 21st century.

Again, these tend to be found in rather restricted type of texts - one example is philosophical texts where the definition of something is being tested. For example:

If tables have 4 legs (as we have just established), then this is not a table.

So, these two types of sentence are not particularly productive or common. In any case, they rarely cause any difficulties from a translating point of view because they are expressed in Greek by **tenses of the indicative**, in a very similar way to how they are expressed in English.

Here's the Greek forms of the four most important types of conditional:

	Real	**Unreal**
past		εἰ + aorist indicative, aorist indicative + ἄν
present		εἰ + imperfect indicative, aorist indicative + ἄν
future	ἐάν + subjunctive, future indicative	εἰ + optative, optative + ἄν

- We find ἄν in the apodosis of all 'unreal' conditionals. In this construction, then, ἄν corresponds to English 'would'. For other uses of ἄν, see uses of ἄν.
- We find the subjunctive in the *protasis* (the 'if clause') of the future real type. NB: You may be tempted to translate this as more 'unreal' than you should.
- The form ἐάν may take the alternative forms ἄν or ἤν which rather conceals the *if* word. You can spot it because it will appear first in its clause.
- Some future conditionals take the future indicative in the protasis (a future future conditional?), and it may be translated in the same way as the future real conditional. The event in the protasis is more certain than those using the subjunctive, often because the future event has just been mentioned. We *can* express the difference in English, though we don't always choose to. Compare:

A: If you go to the party on Saturday (I don't know if you will), can you give me a lift?

B: If you're going to the party on Saturday (as you've just said you are), can you give me a lift?