

Unless: if not, and how to use it

CEFR B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Unless introduces the one condition that stops something: "Unless you hurry, we will be late." The clause stays in the present simple, even about the future.

The rule

Unless means if not

- Unless plus a positive verb equals if plus a negative verb: "Unless it rains" = "If it does not rain."
- Do not add another negative: "Unless you do not hurry" is wrong.
- Unless names one exception, not a general possibility.
- "We will go unless it rains" means rain is the only thing that stops the trip.

Present simple after unless

- The unless clause uses the present simple for future time: "Unless she calls, I will leave."
- Never use will in the unless clause: "Unless she will call" is wrong.
- The main clause can take will, going to, an imperative or can.
- The same rule applies to when, before, after and as soon as.

Unless versus if

- If opens a condition that may or may not happen: "If you come, I will be happy."
- Unless removes everything except one case: "I will not come unless you invite me."
- With unless, the main clause is often negative: "You cannot enter unless you have a ticket."
- If unless can become if not without changing the meaning, unless is safe.

When unless does not fit

- Do not use unless for a direct question: "Unless you are coming?" is wrong; use "Are you coming?"
- Do not use unless for a purely imagined condition: "If I were rich" never becomes "Unless I were rich."
- Use as long as for a continuing requirement: "You can stay as long as you help."
- Use only if when the condition is a strict requirement: "Tickets are sold only if you book online."

Punctuation and position

- The unless clause can come first or second in the sentence.
- When it comes first, a comma separates the two clauses: "Unless you hurry, we will be late."
- When it comes second, no comma is needed: "We will be late unless you hurry."
- The same position rules apply to if, when and as soon as.

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. I will not go ___ you come with me.

2. ___ you study, you will fail the test.

3. We will be late ___ we leave now.

4. You cannot enter ___ you have a ticket.

5. She will not answer ___ you call her twice.

6. I will cook dinner ___ you have already eaten.

7. Unless it ___, we will have a picnic.

8. Do not call me ___ it is urgent.

9. He never speaks ___ someone speaks to him first.

10. Unless you ___, we will leave without you.

11. You will not pass ___ you practise every day.

12. You can borrow the book ___ you return it next week.

13. ___ we leave now, we will not catch the train.

14. The shop is open every day ___ it is a public holiday.

15. "Unless it rains" means ___.

16. She will not come unless you ___ her.

17. Do not use your phone ___ it is an emergency.

18. Choose the correct sentence.

19. I will not tell anyone ___ you want me to.

20. We play tennis on Sunday ___ it rains.

Answer key

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1. **unless** — Unless introduces the condition that would change the decision, and it means if not.
2. **Unless** — Unless sets the single condition that prevents failure.
3. **unless** — Unless means if we do not leave now, so it fits the warning.
4. **unless** — Unless marks the one condition that allows entry.
5. **unless** — Unless introduces the exception to her rule about answering.
6. **unless** — Unless means if you have not already eaten, so it fits the plan.
7. **rains** — The unless clause about the future takes the present simple rains.
8. **unless** — Unless limits the calls to the single urgent case.
9. **unless** — Unless describes the only situation in which he speaks.
10. **hurry** — The unless clause takes the present simple hurry, not will hurry.
11. **unless** — Unless sets the daily practice as the necessary condition.
12. **as long as** — As long as sets the condition that must continue; unless would reverse the meaning.
13. **Unless** — Unless comes first and means if we do not leave now.
14. **unless** — Unless marks the public holiday as the one exception to the schedule.
15. **if it does not rain** — Unless carries the negative meaning, so it equals if it does not rain.
16. **ask** — The unless clause stays in the present simple ask.
17. **unless** — Unless limits phone use to the emergency exception.
18. **Unless you hurry, we will be late.** — Unless already means if not, the clause takes the present simple, and the comma follows it.
19. **unless** — Unless means except if you want me to, so it fits the promise.
20. **unless** — Unless names rain as the single exception to the Sunday routine.