

Wish and if only: past, present and future regrets

CEFR B1-B2 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Wish moves the tense one step back to show that the situation is unreal: past simple for now, past perfect for then, and would for what annoys you.

The rule

Wish plus past simple: the present is not real

- A wish about now takes the past simple: "I wish I had more time."
- Were is standard for all subjects: "I wish I were taller."
- The past form does not mean past time; it marks an unreal present.
- Want states the desire directly, while wish says the reality is different.

Wish plus past perfect: regret about the past

- A wish about the past takes the past perfect: "I wish I had studied harder."
- The regret is fixed because the action cannot change.
- Negative regrets use had not: "I wish I had not said that."
- If only makes the same wish stronger: "If only I had listened."

Wish plus would: annoyance and future change

- Wish plus would complains about repeated behaviour: "I wish you would stop shouting."
- It also asks for a change in the future: "I wish it would stop raining."
- Use would when another person controls the action, not for your own.
- Never say "I wish I would" about yourself.

Wish plus could and wish plus noun

- Wish plus could describes a missing ability: "She wishes she could swim."
- Wish plus noun is a polite formula: "We wish you a happy birthday."
- In that pattern wish is not unreal; it simply gives good wishes.
- Hope is different: it expects something possible: "I hope you pass."

Hope, want and wish

- Hope plus the present or will describes a possible future: "I hope it does not rain."
- Wish plus past forms describes an impossible or unlikely situation.
- Want plus to and a verb states a plain desire: "I want to be taller."
- If only works everywhere wish does, with more emotional force.

Questions

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

1. I wish I ___ more time to practise.

2. She wishes she ___ taller.

3. I wish I ___ harder for the exam last month.

4. He wishes he ___ the answer yesterday.

5. I wish it ___ raining; I want to go out.

6. She wishes she ___ speak French.

7. If only I ___ my keys! They are lost.

8. I wish you ___ interrupting me when I am working.

9. I wish I ___ a better phone, but I cannot afford one.

10. We wish we ___ on holiday right now.

11. He wishes he ___ so rude to his teacher.

12. If only she ___ the truth earlier.

13. I wish it ___ Sunday today.

14. She wishes she ___ play the piano.

15. I wish they ___ that noise. It is giving me a headache.

16. Do you wish you ___ medicine instead of law?

17. I wish I ___ what to do.

18. He wishes his family ___ closer.

19. If only I ___ younger!

20. I ___ you pass your exam tomorrow.

Answer key

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1. **had** — Wish about the present takes the past simple, so had marks the unreal present.
2. **were** — Wish uses were as the unreal form for every subject.
3. **had studied** — A past regret after wish takes the past perfect had studied.
4. **had known** — The past perfect had known regrets an earlier moment in the past.
5. **would stop** — Wish plus would asks for a future change in the weather.
6. **could** — A missing ability after wish uses could, not can.
7. **had not lost** — If only with a past regret takes the past perfect had not lost.
8. **would stop** — Wish plus would complains about repeated behaviour, so would stop fits.
9. **had** — The unreal present after wish takes the past simple had.
10. **were** — Wish about the present uses were for an unreal situation.
11. **had not been** — A regret about a past action takes the past perfect had not been.
12. **had told** — If only about the past takes the past perfect had told.
13. **were** — Wish about an unreal present uses were for every subject.
14. **could** — Wish about ability takes could, which marks the skill as unreal.
15. **would stop** — Wish plus would complains about behaviour that should change.
16. **had studied** — Wish about an earlier choice takes the past perfect had studied.
17. **knew** — The unreal present after wish takes the past simple knew.
18. **lived** — Wish about a present situation takes the past simple lived.
19. **were** — If only about the present uses the unreal form were.
20. **hope** — Hope expects a possible future, while wish marks a situation as unreal.