Unreal time and subjunctives

Explanations

It’s time, it’s high time
These are followed by past simple or continuous, though the time referred to is unreal. See Grammar 8.

It’s time we left. It’s high time I was going.

Wishes

■ Present/future time
Notice the past verb forms after wish.
These are wishes where you want to change a present/future state.

I wish I had a motorbike. (I don’t have one now.)
I wish you weren’t leaving. (You are leaving.)
I wish I was going on holiday with you next week. (I am not going.)

■ Would
Would is used when the speaker wants somebody or something else to change.

I wish he would change his mind and marry Jane.
I wish it would stop raining.
The use with would is often used to describe an annoying habit.

I wish you wouldn’t make such a mess.

■ Past time
As with present wishes, the verb form after wish is one stage further back in the past. These are wishes referring to a past event, which cannot be changed.

I wish I hadn’t eaten so much.
This use of wish is common after if only to express regrets. See Grammar 8.

■ Hope
Wishes about simple future events are expressed with hope.

I hope it doesn’t (won’t) rain tomorrow.
I hope you’ll have a lovely time in Portugal (on your holiday next week).

■ I’d rather is followed by past verb forms in the same way as wishes about the present. It expresses preference about actions.

I’d rather you didn’t smoke in here.
Both I’d rather and I’d sooner are used with normal verb forms when comparing nouns or phrases.

I’d rather be a sailor than a soldier. (present)
I’d rather have lived in Ancient Greece than Ancient Rome. (past)
I'd prefer can be used in the same way, but note that prefer in this type of sentence has an object it.

I'd prefer it if you didn't go.

However, I'd prefer is not followed by an unreal verb form in other situations.

I'd prefer tea to coffee.

I'd prefer you to go swimming (rather than go jogging).

As if, as though

The verb form here depends on whether the situation is true or unreal.

You look as if you're having second thoughts. (True. He is having second thoughts.)

He acts as if he were in charge. (Unreal. He isn't in charge.)

I feel as if an express train had hit me. (It didn't hit me.)

Note however, that the more colloquial like does not require this verb form change. Compare:

You look like you've just seen a ghost
You look as if you'd just seen a ghost.

Suppose and imagine

Understood conditions

The conditional part of these sentences is often understood but not stated.

Imagine we won the pools!

Suppose someone told you that I was a spy!

Imagine we'd never met! (we have met)

As with conditional sentences, if the event referred to is a real possibility, rather than imaginary, a present verb form is possible:

Suppose it starts raining, what'll we do?

Formal Subjunctives

• Insisting, demanding etc

After verbs such as demand, insist, suggest, require which involve an implied obligation, the subjunctive may be used in formal style. This has only one form, that of the infinitive, and there is no third person -s, or past form. The verb be has be for all forms.

They demanded that he leave at once.

The school Principal suggested that he be awarded a scholarship.

• Less formal usage

Less formally, should can be used, and colloquially no verb form change is made, or an infinitive construction is used.

They demanded that he should leave.

They demanded that he left. (informal)

Formulaic Subjunctives

• These are fixed expressions all using subjunctive. Typical expressions are:

God save the Queen!

Be that as it may ...

Come what may ...
1 Underline either hope or wish in each sentence.

a) I hope/wish I’ll see you again soon.
b) I hope/wish the weather improves soon.
c) I hope/wish I knew the answer.
d) I hope/wish you didn’t have to go.
e) I hope/wish you’d stop shouting so much.
f) I hope/wish nothing goes wrong.
g) I hope/wish it would stop raining.
h) I hope/wish you can come to my party.
i) I hope/wish you don’t mind.
j) I hope/wish we could meet next week.

2 Complete each second sentence so that the meaning is similar to the first sentence.

a) I wish you were a bit tidier.
   I wish you would put your things away.

b) I wish you were more interested in your school work.
   I wish you would ..............................................

c) I wish I spoke more languages.
   I wish I could ...................................................

d) I wish I had enough money to buy a car.
   I wish I could ...................................................

e) I wish they had more chess books in the library.
   I wish the library would ......................................

f) I wish there was some soap in the bathroom.
   I wish the cleaners would ..................................

g) I just wish my partner was a bit more romantic!
   I just wish my partner would ..............................

1 a) hope  
b) hope  
c) wish  
d) wish  
e) wish  
f) hope  
g) wish  
h) hope  
i) hope  
j) wish

2 a) put your things away  
b) take/show more interest in your school work  
c) speak more languages  
d) afford to buy a car  
e) get/buy (some) more chess books  
f) put some soap in the bathroom  
g) be a bit more romantic
3 Put each verb in brackets into an appropriate verb form.

a) I’d rather you ........................................................................................................... (not/watch) television while I’m reading.
b) It’s high time you ................................................... (start) working seriously.
c) I wish I ................................................. (spend) more time swimming last summer.
d) Helen is bossy. She acts as if she ................................................... (own) the place.
e) I wish you ................................................. (not/keep) coming late to class.
f) Suppose a complete stranger ................................................... (leave) you a lot of money
in their will!
g) I wish I ................................................. (go) to your party after all.
h) I’d rather you ................................................. (sit) next to Susan, please.
i) The government demanded that the ambassador ................................................. (be)
recalled.
j) You are lucky going to Italy. I wish I ................................................. (go) with you.

4 Correct the error(s) in each sentence.

a) I wish I bought that old house. .................................................................
b) I’d rather you don’t eat all the bread. .................................................................
c) It’s time I go. .................................................................................................
d) I wish I own a motorbike. ................................................................................
e) I wish we are not leaving in the morning. ......................................................
f) Sue would rather reading than watching television. ........................................

.................................................................
g) Come what comes, I’ll be on your side. ............................................................
h) I hope it would stop raining. ...........................................................................
i) I’d prefer if you didn’t wait. ..............................................................................
j) I wish I didn’t listen to you before. .....................................................................

3  a) didn’t watch
    b) started
    c) had spent
    d) owned/owns
    e) did/would not keep
    f) left
    g) had gone/had not gone
    h) sat)did not sit
    i) (should) be
    j) was/were going/could go

4  a) I wish I had bought that old house.
    b) I’d rather you didn’t eat all the bread.
    c) It’s time I went.
    d) I wish I owned a motorbike.
    e) I wish we were not leaving in the morning.
    f) Sue would rather read than watch television.
    g) Come what may, I’ll be on your side.
    h) I hope it (will) stop(s) raining/I wish it would stop raining.
    i) I’d prefer you not to wait/I’d rather you didn’t wait/I’d prefer it if you didn’t wait.
    j) I wish I had not listened to you before.
5. Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Do not change the word given.

a) Do you ever regret not going to university?
   wish
   Do you ever wish you had gone ............................................. to university?

b) I should really be going home now.
   time
   It ................................................................. home now.

c) I'd rather not go by plane.
   prefer
   I'd ................................................................. go by plane.

d) Jack doesn't know all the answers, though he pretends to.
   acts
   Jack ................................................................. all the answers.

e) I'd love to be able to go with you to the opera.
   wish
   I ................................................................. go with you to the opera.

f) I wish I hadn't sold that old painting.
   pity
   It ................................................................. that old painting.

g) I'd rather you didn't stay long at the party.
   better
   It ................................................................. stay long at the party.

h) The management said it was important for us to wear dark suits to the meeting.
   insisted
   The management ............................................ dark suits to the meeting.

i) I've had enough of your constant complaining!
   wish
   I ................................................................. complaining all the time!

j) I'd love to be sitting on a beach in Turkey right now!
   wish
   I ................................................................. on a beach in Turkey right now!
6 Complete each sentence with a suitable word or phrase.

a) I wish you ................................ making so much noise late at night!

b) I’d rather the children ................................ on the television without permission.

c) Suppose ................................ half the money I owe you. Would that satisfy you?

d) I hope ................................ get into trouble on my account. What do you think they’ll say?

e) This is an awful hotel. I wish we ................................ to the Grand instead.

f) It is absolutely ................................ you contact head office in advance.

g) I think it’s high time we ................................. locking all the windows at night.

h) Would you rather I ................................. the lunch, if you feel tired?

i) I wish my car ................................. as fast as yours.

j) I’d prefer you ................................ smoke in here, if you don’t mind.

7 Complete the letter by writing one word in each space. A contraction (don’t) counts as one word.

Dear Tom,

Well, this time next week you’ll be somewhere in Europe on a train. I’m sure any mum would worry! Actually, you’re very lucky. I’d love to (1) ................................ able to go off around the world. I often wish I (2) ................................ travelled more when I was younger. I really hope you (3) ................................ yourself, but do be careful, won’t you? You’re only 18 after all. Do take care with your money, won’t you? And I’d rather you (4) ................................ spend too many nights in your tent alone. It’s so dangerous. I suggest you only (5) ................................ your tent in a proper camp site.

I wish you (6) ................................ going quite so soon. It’s a pity you (7) ................................ stay until after Dad’s 50th birthday. But never mind. I wish Dad (8) ................................ be at the airport to see you off, but he’s got some really important business that day.

Suppose we (9) ................................ out to see you in June?! ... Just a thought.

Anyway, just remember, if you get into any trouble, we’re only a phone call away, and come what (10) ................................ , we’ll always be there for you.

Love, Mum

6 a) would stop
b) did not turn/switch on
c) I paid/gave you (back)
d) you do not/won’t
e) had gone/could go
f) essential/imperative that
g) started
h) made/got/prepared/cooked
i) was/went
j) not to

7 1) be
2) had
3) enjoy
4) didn’t
5) use/pitch
6) were not
7) cannot
8) could
9) come/came
10) may