

Conditionals: Third or Mixed?

Q In my zealous mood of this morning I brought a few quotations and headlines from the *Guardian* newspaper about Mandela's death. The title of one article had caught my attention and, with the students working on conditionals, first, second and third, I thought this would be an interesting illustration,...: *"If Nelson Mandela really had won, he wouldn't be seen as a universal hero"* Of course, the students went nuts about this being second or third conditional, referring to their grammar bank (thanks, *New English File*) where the structure is introduced with: If + had + past participle ; would + have + past participle

Manuela G., Milan, Italy

A: First of all, Manuela, I think it's a great idea to bring in authentic materials so that your learners can see how the bits and pieces of language they study are actually used and are part of the real living language. Great stuff!

Many pedagogical grammars and coursebooks refer to different types of conditional sentences. Type 3, as it is often called, describes when the condition occurred in the past, and so did the result. For example:
If Mandela had died young, he wouldn't have become the symbol that he became.

Structurally, this follows the pattern you describe:

If + had (not) + past participle ; would (not) + have + past participle.

But the sentence you quote has a) a different meaning and therefore b) a different structure:

If Nelson Mandela really had won, he wouldn't be seen as a universal hero.

The condition is in the past (as in the previous example) but the result is in the present, not the past: *he wouldn't be seen as a universal hero NOW*

So the structure is

If + had (not) + past participle ; would (not) + verb base (bare infinitive).

The structure in the result clause is identical to the result clause in what is often called a Type 2 conditional e.g.

If Mandela were still alive, the world would be a better place.

If + past tense; would (not) + verb base (bare infinitive).

So because your sentence involves elements of Type 3 conditionals (in the condition clause) and Type 2 conditionals (in the result clause), it is often referred to as a **mixed conditional**.

Your original example from *The Guardian* is made a little more complicated by the fact that *he wouldn't be seen as a universal hero* includes

would (not) + verb base (bare infinitive), but here there is a passive construction (*wouldn't be seen*) which requires an extra past participle to be added. Perhaps this is what confused your students.

Many commentators and grammarians do not agree with this division of conditional sentences into Type 1, Type 2, Type 3, mixed etc. They think this is an over-simplification or is in fact inaccurate, preferring to talk about concepts of Reality and Non-Reality. You might like to research this in, for example, Swan: *Practical English Usage* or my own *Exploring English*. However, the common Types 1, 2, 3 etc classification is a useful framework for many learners.