

How to Use 'Wish'

Wishes about the present or future

Wish + (that) + past simple:

We can use 'wish' to talk about something that we would like to be different in the present or the future. It's used for things which are impossible or very unlikely.

- I wish that I had a big house (I don't have a big house, but it's a nice idea!).
- I wish that we didn't need to work today (we do need to work today, unfortunately).
- I wish that you lived close by (you don't live close by).
- I wish that John wasn't busy tomorrow (he is busy, unfortunately).

(*In formal writing, you will see 'were' instead of 'was' after wish. This is correct, but it's also fine to use 'was', in the same way as with the second conditional.

- 'I wish I were rich' or 'I wish I was rich'.)

We also use 'wish' with 'could' to talk about things in the present or future that we would like to be different. In this situation, 'could' is the past simple of 'can'.

Of course, we use 'can' to talk about ability - if we know how to do something or not. For example, 'I can speak Spanish' or 'I can't drive'. We also use 'can' to talk about possibility - if things are possible or not possible. For example, 'we can't come to the party tonight' or 'John can help you clean up'. We use 'could' with 'wish' to talk about ability and to talk about possibility.

- I wish that I could speak Spanish (but, unfortunately, I can't speak Spanish).

- I wish that I could drive (I can't drive).
- I wish that we could go to the party tonight (unfortunately, we're busy so we can't go).
- I wish that John could help you clean up (John is at work, so he can't help).

We don't usually use 'wish' in this way for things that are really possible in the future. Instead, we use 'hope'.

- I hope that you pass your exam (NOT: ~~I wish that you passed the exam~~).
- I hope that it's sunny tomorrow (NOT: ~~I wish that it was sunny tomorrow~~).
- I hope that Julie has a lovely holiday (NOT: ~~I wish that Julie had a lovely holiday~~).

Wish + (that) + would:

On the other hand, we use 'would' with 'wish' in a little bit of a special way. It's generally used about other people who are doing (or not doing) something that we don't like and we want that person to change. It's not usually used about ourselves, or about something which nobody can change though, exceptionally, we do use it about the weather.

- I wish that John wouldn't eat all the chocolate. (John does usually eat all the chocolate and I don't like it. I want him to change his behaviour!)
- I wish that the neighbours would be quiet! (They are not quiet and I don't like the noise.)
- I wish that you wouldn't smoke so much! (You do smoke a lot and I don't like it. I want you to change this.)
- I wish that you didn't work late so often.
- I wish that it would stop raining!

We don't usually use 'would' when there's no feeling that we want somebody to change their behaviour.

- NOT: I wish that tomorrow would be a holiday. (Instead: I wish that tomorrow was a holiday.)

- NOT: I wish that I would work harder. (It's strange to use 'wish' + 'would' about yourself, as you can change your behaviour if you don't like it!)

Wishes about the past

Wish + (that) + past perfect:

We can use 'wish' with the past perfect to talk about regrets from the past. These are things that have already happened but we wish they'd happened in a different way.

This use of 'wish' is very similar to the third conditional.

- I wish that I had studied harder at school. (I didn't study hard at school, and now I'm sorry about it.)
- I wish that I hadn't eaten so much yesterday! (But I did eat a lot yesterday. Now I think it wasn't a good idea.)
- I wish that the train had been on time. (But unfortunately the train was late, and so I missed my interview.)

Other uses of 'wish'

Wish + to + infinitive:

We can use 'wish' with the infinitive to mean 'would like'. This is very formal. We don't usually use a continuous tense with 'wish' in this case.

- I wish to speak to the headmaster. (This means the same as 'I would like to speak to the headmaster'.)
- I wish to go now.

Wish + object + to + infinitive:

In the same way, we can use 'wish' with an object and an infinitive.

- I do not wish you to publish this article.
- I wish these people to leave.

Wish + somebody + something:

This is used mostly in set phrases.

- I wished him a happy birthday.
- They wished us Merry Christmas.