

Using the appropriate mood

There are three moods in English: the *indicative*, used for facts, opinions, and questions; the *imperative*, used for orders or advice; and the *subjunctive*, used in certain contexts to express wishes, requests, or conditions contrary to fact. Of these moods, the subjunctive causes the most problems for writers.

Use the subjunctive mood in the few contexts that require it.

Forms of the subjunctive

In the subjunctive mood, present-tense verbs do not change form to indicate the number and person of the subject. Instead, the subjunctive uses the base form of the verb (*be*, *drive*, *employ*) with all subjects.

It is important that you *be* [not *are*] prepared for the interview.

We asked that she *drive* [not *drives*] more slowly.

Also, in the subjunctive mood, there is only one past-tense form of *be*: *were* (never *was*).

If I *were* [not *was*] you, I'd proceed more cautiously.

Uses of the subjunctive

The subjunctive mood appears only in a few contexts: in contrary-to-fact clauses beginning with *if* or expressing a wish; in *that* clauses following verbs such as *ask*, *insist*, *recommend*, *request*, and *suggest*; and in certain set expressions.

IN CONTRARY-TO-FACT CLAUSES BEGINNING WITH IF When a subordinate clause beginning with *if* expresses a condition contrary to fact, use the subjunctive mood.

▶ If I ^{were} ~~was~~ a member of Congress, I would vote for that bill.

▶ We could be less cautious if Jake ^{were} ~~was~~ more trustworthy.

The verbs in these sentences express conditions that do not exist: The writer is not a member of Congress, and Jake is not trustworthy.

Do not use the subjunctive mood in *if* clauses expressing conditions that exist or may exist.

If Dana *wins* the contest, she will leave for Barcelona in June.

IN CONTRARY-TO-FACT CLAUSES EXPRESSING A WISH In formal English, the subjunctive is used in clauses expressing a wish or desire; in informal speech, however, the indicative is more common.

FORMAL I wish that Dr. Vaughn *were* my professor.

INFORMAL I wish that Dr. Vaughn *was* my professor.

(continued)

IN THAT CLAUSES FOLLOWING VERBS SUCH AS ASK, INSIST, REQUEST, AND SUGGEST Because requests have not yet become reality, they are expressed in the subjunctive mood.

▶ Professor Moore insists that her students ^{be} ~~are~~ on time.

▶ We recommend that Lambert ^{file} ~~files~~ form 1050 soon.

IN CERTAIN SET EXPRESSIONS The subjunctive mood, once more widely used, remains in certain set expressions: *Be that as it may*, *as it were*, *far be it from me*, and so on.