

Sequence of Tenses Studied & Maybe Clarified



Sequence of Tenses

Except for the Hortatory/Iussive (“let us”), **all other subjunctive verbs always live in subordinate clauses always all the time.**

If we have a subordinate clause, we also have a *main clause* (and a complex sentence). A complex sentence consists of two or more unequal clauses: a main clause and a subordinate clause(s). The verb in the main clause is **ALWAYS in charge of tense** in a complex sentence. The subordinate clauses have a subjunctive verb (or verbs) that fall “under the rule” of the main verb (as *subordinates* normally are).

This means only the tense of the main verb refers to real time and reality! That’s right, the indicative tells us the actual when and how! The subjunctive (subordinate) verb **does not show us real time.** Instead, a subjunctive verb CAN ONLY INDICATE relative time. Relative to what? Relative to the indicative verb.

Subjunctive time is ALWAYS relative to real time.

The main verb (any indicative, any imperative, even any iussive) may be *any* tense.

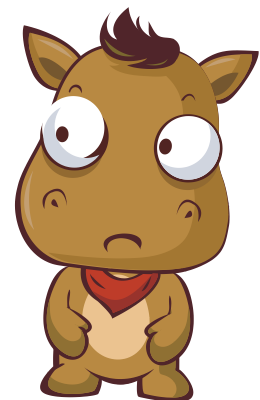
Subjunctive verbs only exist in a total of FOUR tenses. Why four? All these tenses are RELATIVE to the main verb! **We don’t need all 6 tenses of the subjunctive because time is always relative in subjunctive-land.**

Let me repeat: There is *no need for subjunctive verbs to appear in all SIX tenses because subjunctive tenses are purely relative and never ever real time.* **The tense of the main verb dictates the actual tense (the one based in reality) while the subordinate subjunctive relates to that tense in one of three possible ways: BEFORE, DURING, AFTER.**

Why (you might surely ask) are there *three* possible relations to time (**before, during, after**) but *four* tenses of the subjunctive? Hold your horses, I’ll explain...

Look at these variations here in which reality tells us that Billy Bob is hungry. The underlined portion is hypothetical (I don’t think he is really going to eat that poor horse) and so, in Latin, we would express that clause in the subjunctive:

1. Billy Bob is so hungry **that** he could eat a horse right now.
2. Billy Bob is so hungry **that** he might eat a horse soon.
3. Billy Bob is so hungry **that** he could have eaten a horse a bit ago.



In these examples, Billy Bob is hungry *right now in the present* (Billy Bob is so hungry that). The horse (poor thing) gets eaten at the same time Billy Bob is hungry in #1; some time soon *in the future* in #2, and some time prior to now (a bit ago) in #3. **Only the main verb expresses reality** (the immediate and dangerous hunger of Billy Bob). The second part of the sentence (the part coming after “that”) would use subjunctive verbs if we were writing these examples in Latin.

The subjunctive verb’s job is to appear in a tense that is *relative* to that main verb in one of three ways: past, same time, future.

Again, I’ve listed only three possible relationships to a main verb (before, during, after) while there are four **tenses of the subjunctive**. Let’s make sense of that reality right now.

We have **SIX perfectly good tenses of the indicative mood**. Because subjunctive time is relative to real time, Latin geniuses long ago came up with a handy combination of tenses to express the hypothetical time relationships best.

What is this *Sequence of Tenses*?

Clever Roman authors divided main verb/subjunctive verb combinations into 2 orderly piles to help us make time-relationship-sense of everything. Latin-loving monks long ago then later named these two groups. I am campaigning to call these two piles “Frick and Frack”—or at the very minimum “group 1 and group 2,” but here’s what other trendy and powerful old Latin teachers came up with for the two names (BOH-ring!):

The Primary and The Secondary/Historical Sequence of Tenses.

Almost every subjunctive construction in the Latin language will rely on one of these two sequences to express the time relationship between the hypothetical (subjunctive) and reality (expressed by indicative, imperative, and occasionally iussive). Therefore, as you learn all the tenses of the subjunctive, you can busily apply these sequence rules to subjunctive constructions that you’ve already learned so far and all that you will ever learn in the future.

The Latin expresses a **hypothetical event with a subjunctive** (subordinate) clause and a **reality based event with a main verb which will usually be in the indicative** (or occasionally imperative or maybe even a iussive subjunctive). Your only three options for such time relationships between reality and hypothetical is that the hypothetical event happens **before, during or after** a real event takes place. In the mind of the ancient Romans, this was accomplished in 1 of 2 ways:



The name for combining certain tenses of the indicative (main verb) with certain tenses of the subjunctive (subordinate clause) in such a way that these relationships are clear is called the **sequence of tenses**.

1. Hypothetical events that take place **now or in the future**. (primary sequence)
2. Hypothetical events that take place **sometime in the past** (secondary/historical sequence)

Now/Future or Past

What were they thinking by combining NOW and FUTURE into one pile? THINK: if an event is currently hypothetical, does it not always have a future tense already built in? Billy Bob could eat a horse. That's true now and that's true in the future (at least until he obtains a reasonable snack).

This chart describes the 'SEQUENCE OF TENSES"— apply these time rules to purpose clauses, result clauses, indirect questions, all other subjunctive constructions hence forth.

If your main verb is one of these tenses:		Then you will use these tenses of subjunctive to express one of the three time-relationships	
Present or future Present tense, Future tense Future perfect tense	Primary Sequence	Future Periphrastic + sim	= Time after (future)
		Present Subjunctive	= Same time OR after (now)
		Perfect Subjunctive	= Time before (past)
Any past tense (imperfect, perfect, pluperfect)	Secondary Historical	Future Periphrastic + essem	= Time after (future-like)
		Imperfect Subjunctive	= Same time or after (nowish)
		Pluperfect Subjunctive	= Time before (past-like)

Primary Sequence

*Use for any real-time **present or future** event*

How do we know when we are dealing with a primary sequence sentence? Your indicative main verb must be in the **present, future, or future perfect tense**! What does that mean for the subjunctive subordinate clause?

1. a **present** subjunctive subordinate verb **expresses the same time** relative to the main verb
2. a **present** subjunctive subordinate verb **ALSO expresses action future** relative to the main verb (why? Because there is barely any difference when the action is hypothetical)
 If a true future time relationship is SUPER important:
 use the **future periphrastic with a present form of sim.***
3. a **perfect** subjunctive subordinate verb **expresses action in the past** relative to the main verb

Secondary Sequence

Use for any real-time **past event**

How do we know when we are dealing with a secondary sequence sentence? Your indicative main verb will be **imperfect, perfect, or pluperfect** indicative tense. What does that mean for the subjunctive subordinate clause?

1. an **imperfect** subjunctive subordinate verb **expresses the same time**, relative to the main verb
2. an **imperfect** subjunctive subordinate verb **ALSO expresses action future, relative** to the main verb (why? Because there is barely any difference when the action is hypothetical)
 - a. When a relatively future time relationship is SUPER important, use the **future periphrastic with a form of essem* (imperfect subjunctive form of sum)**
3. a **pluperfect** subjunctive subordinate verb **expresses past action** relative to the main verb

***What the Blazes is a Future Periphrastic?!**

Periphrastic means “a verbal *workaround*,” named as it is because grammar experts are snobs and poor at naming things. The **future periphrastic** was invented to make up for a lack of a future subjunctive tense when an author emphatically needed one (which is rare). You might even say the future periphrastic *is the future subjunctive*, invented long after the Romans had run out of other good ideas.

The future periphrastic is ONLY necessary when an author must emphasize an action that is in the future compared to the main action. Most of the time it is totally unnecessary and overkill!

How one builds and recognizes a future periphrastic (FP)

To build a FP for use in a **primary sequence sentence**, use any **future active participle** and then pair it with a **conjugated form of sum in the**

PRESENT subjunctive (*sim, sis, etc.*):

Rogant quid facturus sit = They ask what he will do (a primary sequence example—notice that the –us ending agrees with Gaius, the subject of the subjunctive verb)

To build a FP for use in a **secondary sequence sentence**, use a **future active participle** of any verb and then pair it with a **conjugated form of sum in the IMPERFECT subjunctive** (*essem, esses, etc.*):

Rogaverunt quid facturus esset = They asked what he would do. (a secondary sequence example)



Indirect Questions (chapter 30) use the Subjunctive Mood & Sequence of Tense Rules

Look at these examples (analyze the tenses of verbs as you compare)

Time Contemporaneous

Primary Sequence (group 1)	Secondary Sequence (group 2)
Nescio quid facias , <i>I don't know what you're doing.</i>	Nescivi quid faceres , <i>I didn't know what you were doing.</i>
Rogat veniantne nostri amici , <i>he asks whether our friends are coming.</i>	Rogaverunt venirentne nostri amici , <i>they asked whether our friends were coming.</i>

Time Prior

Primary Sequence (group 1)	Secondary Sequence (group 2)
Nescio quid feceris , <i>I don't know what you did.</i>	Nescivi quid fecisses , <i>I didn't know what you had done.</i>
Rogat venerintne nostri amici , <i>they are asking whether our friends came.</i>	Rogaverunt venissentne nostri amici , <i>they asked whether our friends came.</i>

Time Subsequent (After)

Primary Sequence (group 1)	Secondary Sequence (group 2)
Nescio quid facturus sis , <i>I don't know what you will do (your going to do).</i>	Nescivi quid facturus esses , <i>I didn't know what you were going to do (would do)</i>
Rogat sintne venturi nostri amici , <i>they ask whether our friends are coming.</i>	Rogaverunt essentne venturi nostri amici , <i>they asked whether our friends were coming.</i>

There are 2 Main Exceptions to the Sequence of Tenses

(For more details read the bottom of Wheelock's page 248)

1. The Historical Present

This construction is used for vivid narrative writing like this: "So, you won't believe what happened last night! I'm sitting in my room when suddenly I hear a knock at the door!" In this situation, your main verb will be in the PERFECT tense followed by a PRIMARY sequence subjunctive! I'll talk more about the historical present in class.

2. Purpose & Result Clauses don't normally use perfect or pluperfect main verbs!

Can you figure it out?

Stop! Print the page below and FOLD the page in half (don't peek at the answers until you've given it all a try). Write the correct form of the indirect question, being careful to observe the sequence of tense as established by the tense of the main verb. (Use the future active periphrastic for indirect questions showing time subsequent)

Direct Question	Main Verb	Indirect Question
Quid facies?	rogo	
Quid facis?		
Quid fecisti?		
Direct Question	Main Verb	Indirect Question
Quid facies?	rogavi	
Quid facis?		
Quid fecisti?		
Direct Question	Main Verb	Indirect Question
Venientne nostri amici?	rogo	
Veniuntne nostri amici		
Veneruntne nostri amici?		
Direct Question	Main Verb	Indirect Question
Venientne nostri amici?	rogavi	
Veniuntne nostri amici		
Veneruntne nostri amici?		

Below are the answers to the above. See if you can figure out the top chart and then check your work below.

Direct Question	Main Verb	Indirect Question
Quid facies?	rogo	Quid facturus sis.
Quid facis?		Quid facias.
Quid fecisti?		Quid feceris.
Direct Question	Main Verb	Indirect Question
Quid facies?	rogavi	Quid facturus esses.
Quid facis?		Quid faceres.
Quid fecisti?		Quid fecisses.
Direct Question	Main Verb	Indirect Question
Venientne nostri amici?	rogo	Sintne venture nostri amici
Veniuntne nostri amici		Veniantne nostri amici
Veneruntne nostri amici?		Venerintne nostri amici
Direct Question	Main Verb	Indirect Question
Venientne nostri amici?	rogavi	Essentne nostri amici
Veniuntne nostri amici		Venerentne nostri amici
Veneruntne nostri amici?		Venissentne nostri amici