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Was
vs
Were



Was vs Were

The first difference between **was** and **were** is the *Past Tense*: **was** for the first and third-person singular, and **were** for the second-person singular.

But what about hypotheticals—for example, in a sentence like “If I was/were a dog . . .”? Which is the correct choice?

In these cases, the key to understanding when to use was or were in a sentence is to determine whether you need to use the subjunctive mood or not.

A verb is in the subjunctive mood if it expresses an action or state that is not reality. For example, it might be hypothetical, wished for, or conditional.

“Was” and “were” as past and subjunctive

Here we compare the **past** and **subjunctive** conjugations of the verb **To Be**.

To Be								
	I	You	He	She	It	We	You	They
Past	was	were	was	was	was	were	were	were
Subjunctive	were	were	were	were	were	were	were	were

You can see that the only choice is for I, He, She, and It.

Is it “if I was” or “if I were”?

Use **were** if the state of being you are describing is in no way the current reality. This is true whenever a hypothetical situation is expressed, for example.

- **If Harry were to find all the Horcruxes in time, we would not be forced to submit to Voldemort’s evil will.**
- **Would you invite me over if I were more polite at the dinner table?**

The first sentence can be described as an unreal conditional clause. These hypotheticals are easy to spot because they are often introduced by an if and are related to another clause containing a would or could.

Another type of unreal conditional sentence that uses the same construction demanding the subjunctive were is the impossible or improbable type.

- **If it were possible to solve the puzzle, I would have done it.**

Here the speaker implies that the puzzle is unsolvable. Therefore, solving the puzzle is not a likely reality, and the subjunctive **were** is used instead of the past tense was.

That does not mean that every clause beginning with **if** requires the use of **if I was** rather than **if I were**.

- **If I was wrong about Felicity’s love of puppies, I can take this one back to the shelter.**

In this sentence, the speaker acknowledges that it is possible he or she may have incorrectly thought that Felicity loves puppies and has given

her a puppy in error. The fact that it is possible the speaker is describing reality makes this an indicative sentence, not a subjunctive one.

Therefore, we use **was** instead of were.

Use “**were**,” not “**was**,” for wishful thinking

A sure sign that you should use the subjunctive is when the word **wish** is used. A **wish** is the desire or hope for something that cannot or probably will not happen.

- **I wish I were the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature.**
- **He wishes his grammar were better.**
- **I wish the stories about me were true, but I am not really the master of the universe.**
- **She wishes she were at least five inches taller.**

Here’s a tip

These phrases are never correct:

I wish I was, I wish it was, he wishes he was, she wishes she was.

Always remember this rule about the usage of was and were:

Use were with expressions that are hypothetical, wishful, imagined, desired, doubtful, and otherwise contrary to fact—that is to say, not real.

What have we learnt?

I, he, she, it was=possible

I, he, she, it were=impossible

- **If I was to go to New York, would you come, too?**

It is possible for me to go.

- **If I were an alien, would you still love me?**

I am not an alien and can never be one.