

# The Present Subjunctive in English: Expressions of the Timeless Present

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## 1. *Introduction*

The subjunctive is one of three moods or modes in English that indicate the manner of an action. The indicative mood is used to ask questions or to state facts, and the imperative mood is employed in commands and requests. Sabin (2005) maintains the subjunctive is “used in dependent clauses following main (independent) clauses expressing necessity, demand, or wishing...also used in *if*, *as if*, and *as though* clauses that state conditions which are improbable, doubtful, or contrary to fact” (p. 573). Subjunctive verb forms were more common in Old and Middle English and appear to be becoming increasingly rare in modern English. Swan (1995) maintains that forms of the subjunctive in older English were used “in many kinds of ‘unreal’ sense to talk about possible, desirable or imaginary situations” (p. 566). The present subjunctive essentially serves to express states and actions that are deemed to be desirable and necessary.

In many languages, possible or desirable, hypothetical situations are expressed through the use of distinct verb forms. Such distinct morphological constructions existed in English in the distant past but have gradually been replaced by simpler word forms. Modal verbs, normal verb forms, and special past tenses have largely replaced subjunctive forms in modern English (Swan, 1995). Gucker (1966) asserts, “The changing language has resulted in the gradual abandonment of the subjunctive mood except for one very limited purpose: when expressing a condition contrary to fact, in an *if* clause, or after a verb which expresses a wish” (p. 36). Gucker’s observations are concerned primarily with the use of the past subjunctive and he appears to consider the present subjunctive to be largely abandoned and archaic in the context of modern, contemporary, daily English usage and not worthy of detailed discussion.

## ***2. Exploring Definitions of the Subjunctive Mood: Meaning and Structure***

The subjunctive mood in English may be defined in various ways. Berube (1985) asserts that the subjunctive mood is “a verb form or set of forms used in English to express a contingent or hypothetical action” (p. 1212). Berube (1985) describes mood as a “verb form or a set of verb forms inflected to indicate the manner in which the action or state expressed by a verb is viewed with respect to such functions as factuality, possibility, or command” (p. 813). The present subjunctive in English is mainly used to express the concept of necessity but can also be used to denote possibility.

Swan (1995) states:

The subjunctive is a special kind of present tense which has no *-s* in the third person singular. It is sometimes used in *that*-clauses in a formal style, especially in American English, after words which express the idea that something is important or desirable (e.g. *suggest, recommend, ask, insist, vital, essential, important, advice*). The same forms are used in both present and past tenses (p. 566).

The present subjunctive in English employs the same form as the infinitive. For example, the present subjunctive form of “to live” is “live,” and the present subjunctive form of “to be” is simply “be.” This form is the same for all persons, and it should also be noted that the third person singular “s” is not added to present subjunctive forms. The use of the present subjunctive was more common in Old and Middle English. The subjunctive appears to be disappearing from English, and is increasingly rare in daily conversations and writing (Finney, n.d.) The present subjunctive is used in subjective wishes, after verbs that order, urge or suggest, in appositive clauses with nouns based on verbs that request or suggest, after certain adjectives that express necessity or importance, and in certain adverbial clauses (Kaixin, 1996). Kaixin combines subjunctive semantic categories with common grammatical constructions for this mood, matching form with deeper meaning.

3. Kaixin (1996, p. 94) provides the following examples of the use of the present subjunctive divided into five categories:

**A. Subjective Wishes**

1. Grammar **be** hanged!
2. The devil **take** it!
3. May our friendship **last** long!
4. Long **live** the Republic!

**B. Verbs that Order, Urge or Suggest**

1. They proposed that the demonstration (should) **take place** in their new showrooms.
2. I ask that Charlie **be** there.
3. I move that the meeting **be adjourned** for a week.
4. Jean's father insists that he **not stay** in this hotel.
5. It's suggested that she (should) **stay behind** to look after the children.
6. It's required that the machine **be oiled** from time to time.

**C. Appositive Clauses with Nouns Based on Verbs that Order, Urge or Suggest**

1. His request that he **be admitted** was granted.
2. Your advice that she **wait** till next week is reasonable.
3. Our decision was that we **give up** the project.
4. My suggestion is that he **be sent** there.
5. My idea is that the instrument **be tested** again before it is used.

**D. Subject Clauses after Adjectives that Express Necessity or Importance**

1. It is necessary that the flow of cooling water (should) **be kept** steady.
2. It was essential that the application forms **be sent** back before the deadline.
3. It is advisable that he **stay** for the entire conference.
4. It is imperative that you **be** there in person.

### E. Certain Adverbial Clauses

1. He told his wife as little as possible lest she (should) **spread** the news all over the town.
2. They moved the prisoner in order that he not **disturb** the proceedings any further.
3. Home is home, **be** it ever so homely.
4. **Be** he rich or poor, I will marry him all the same.
5. I'll work all night if need **be**.

The present subjunctive continues to survive in modern English primarily in the context of certain fixed phrases and expressions that are becoming increasingly rare. Such expressions often seem unusually formal, old fashioned, or poetic in modern English and are sometimes used to achieve a comical or dramatic effect. Subjunctive phrases and expressions are becoming increasingly rare in contemporary American English, and may be more common in British English and certain varieties of formal English that have survived and acquired their own unique characteristics among the educated upper classes in former British colonies such as India and Jamaica, among many others. The verb most commonly used in the present subjunctive form is “be,” and also occurs regularly in present subjunctive passive constructions. The following are examples of present subjunctive expressions that are still in relatively common use:

4. MacFadyen (1996) contributes the following examples of contemporary use of the present subjunctive:

- (1) It is urgent that Harraway **attend** Monday's meeting.
- (2) The Member of Parliament demanded that the Minister **explain** the effects of the bill on the environment.
- (3) The sergeant ordered that Calvin **scrub** the walls of the mess hall.
- (4) We suggest that Mr. Beatty **move** the car out of the no parking zone.
- (5) The committee recommended that the bill **be passed** immediately.

### ***5. More Examples of Fixed Subjunctive Phrases:***

- (1) “Long **live** the king!”
- (2) “Long **live** the queen!”
- (3) “Long **live** the happy couple!”
- (4) “God **bless** the queen!”
- (5) “(God) **bless** each and every one of you!”
- (6) “God **bless** the United States of America!”
- (7) “Heaven **help** him!”
- (8) “Heaven **help** them!”
- (9) “Heaven forbid!”
- (10) “**Come** what may, I will find a way to help you!”
- (11) “**Come** what may, we will never give up!”
- (12) “**Curse** this storm!”
- (13) “**Curse** the day he was born!”
- (14) “If need **be** (if it is necessary), we can bring more food to the party.”
- (15) “If need **be**, they can stay here tonight.”
- (16) “**Be** that as it may, we simply cannot help you this time.”
- (17) “If I have to walk another fifty miles, then so **be** it.”

### ***6. More Examples of Formal Subjunctive Structures:***

- (1) “She suggested that a meeting(should) **be held** to discuss the matter.”
- (2) “The president recommended that action (should) **be taken** immediately.”
- (3) “They requested that a decision (should) **be made**.”
- (4) “It is essential that all students **have** access to a quality education.”
- (5) “It is very important that he **be** there.”
- (6) “They felt it was important that John **write** a letter of apology to the family.”
- (7) “We demand that he **be given** a chance to vote.”

7. Finney (n.d.) provides these examples of fixed phrases or “formulaic subjunctives”:

- **be** that as it may

- blessed **be** !
- far **be** it from me
- if it **please** the court
- if need **be**
- truth **be** told
- God **bless** [you | her | him | them | us every one]
- **come** what may
- [God | Heaven] **forbid** !
- **perish** the thought
- God **save** [the alpacas | the Queen | the King | our merry band]
- **suffice** it to say

8. Finney (n.d.) contributes the following quotes from English literature, songs, and the media containing examples of both past and modern usage of the present subjunctive:

(1) The sentence of the court is that you **be** imprisoned and kept to hard labor for two years.

Mr. Justice Wills, pronouncing sentence on Oscar Wilde (1895-05-25)

(2) If it be, why seems it so particular with thee? **Be** thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd, **Bring** with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, **Be** thy intents wicked or charitable, Thou comest us such a questionable shape that I will speak to thee ... now or whensoever, provided I be so able as now.

William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (xxxx)

(3) Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain, though your dreams **be** tossed and blown.

From the song, "You'll Never Walk Alone", sung by Mario Lanza, BMG Classics 60720-2-RG (RCA Victor) (album released 1991; recorded 1950s).

(4) If this be madness, then call it madness ...

From the song, "Beloved", sung by Mario Lanza, RCA Camden Classics CAD1-450 (album released 1987; recorded 1950s).

(5) Custom dictates that the prize date **be** announced just days in advance. "Early Nobel announcement prompts speculation", article on cnn.com (1999-09-29)

(6) God **help** our country's future if we decide otherwise. Manager Rogan in the trial of President William Jefferson Clinton (1999-01-08?)

9. Thomson and Martinet (1991, p. 253) provide the following examples from English literature of the poetic use of the present subjunctive:

*Stevenson*: Fair the day **shine** as it shone in my childhood. (May the day shine/I hope it will shine.)

*Shakespeare*: If this **be** error, and upon me proved... (if this is an error).

*Byron*: Though the heart **be** still as loving... (though the heart is)

10. Sabin (2005, p. 277) divides the present subjunctive into five main semantic categories, and provides the following examples:

- (1) **Necessity**: It is essential that he *arrive* on time. (Not: arrives.)
- (2) **Demand**: I must insist that he *do* the work over. (Not: does.)
- (3) **Request**: They have asked that she *remain* on the committee until the end of the year. (Not: remains.)
- (4) **Urging**: I suggested that she *type* the material triple-spaced to allow room for some very heavy editing. (Not: types.)
- (5) **Resolution**: They have resolved that Fred *represent* them. (Not: represents.)

The categories of subjunctive meaning above elaborated by Sabin underline the importance of expressions of necessity and desire in the use of the present subjunctive. Necessity may be viewed as the main category and demands, requests, urging, and resolution as subcategories of related meaning that are all essentially expressions of states or actions that are

deemed to be necessary and important. The concept of necessity seems to define the core element of meaning in the present subjunctive. Sabin does not directly address the use of the present subjunctive to express possibility in his five major subjunctive categories.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the present subjunctive appears to be disappearing from daily use in both spoken and written English. When it does occur, it is often employed for a dramatic or comical effect. Special subjunctive verb forms have largely disappeared from modern spoken and written English, and the use of the present subjunctive in general is becoming increasingly rare. The concept of necessity seems to define the core element of meaning in the present subjunctive.

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