

ZOU AND ZOUDEN IN DUTCH

A one-page guide to politeness, conditions, reported speech and uncertainty

The forms *zou* and *zouden* come from *zullen*. They can describe a future viewed from the past, an imagined situation, a polite request or information that is only reported.

1. FORMS AND CORE USES

Singular: ik, jij, u, hij, zij, het *zou*
Plural: wij, jullie, zij *zouden*

FUTURE FROM A PAST VIEWPOINT

Hij zei dat hij later zou komen.
He said that he would come later.

HYPOTHETICAL

Ik zou meegaan als ik tijd had.
I would come along if I had time.

POLITE OR TENTATIVE

Zou u dat kunnen herhalen?
Could you repeat that?

REPORTED, NOT CONFIRMED

De minister zou aftreden.
The minister is reportedly going to resign.

2. POLITE REQUESTS AND WISHES

Zou je me even kunnen helpen?

Could you help me for a moment?

Zou ik hier mogen zitten?

May I sit here?

Ik zou graag een kop koffie willen.

I would like a cup of coffee.

Ik zou liever thuisblijven.

I would rather stay home.

Kun je me helpen? is already normal and polite. *Zou* makes the request softer or more cautious; it is not compulsory.

3. CONDITIONAL SENTENCES OPEN OR REAL POSSIBILITY

Als ik tijd heb, ga ik mee.

If I have time, I will come along.

HYPOTHETICAL PRESENT OR FUTURE

Als ik tijd had, zou ik meegaan.

If I had time, I would come along.

Also correct: *Als ik tijd zou hebben, zou ik meegaan.*

UNREAL PAST

Als ik dat had geweten, zou ik niet zijn gegaan.

If I had known that, I would not have gone.

The word *dan* may be added, but it is often omitted.

4. COMMON MODAL COMBINATIONS

ZOU KUNNEN - could / might be able to

We zouden morgen kunnen vertrekken.

We could leave tomorrow.

ZOU MOETEN - should / be expected to

Je zou meer moeten slapen.

You should sleep more.

De trein zou om tien uur moeten aankomen.

The train should arrive at ten.

ZOU MOGEN - would be allowed / polite permission

Zou ik even mogen bellen?

May I make a quick call?

ZOU WILLEN - would like

Zou je mee willen gaan?

Would you like to come along?

5. PAST VIEWPOINT AND REPORTED INFO

FUTURE VIEWED FROM THE PAST

Direct: "Ik zal later bellen."

"I will call later."

Hij zei dat hij later zou bellen.

He said that he would call later.

We zouden om acht uur vertrekken, maar de trein reed niet.

We were going to leave at eight, but the train was not running.

UNCONFIRMED OR SECOND-HAND INFORMATION

Bij de brand zouden drie mensen gewond zijn geraakt.

Three people are reported to have been injured in the fire.

Here *zou(den)* signals that the speaker is reporting information rather than confirming it.

6. WORD ORDER AND COMMON MISTAKES

MAIN CLAUSE

Ik zou morgen komen.

I would come tomorrow.

Ik zou je kunnen helpen.

I could help you.

Zou je me kunnen helpen?

Could you help me?

SUBORDINATE CLAUSE

... dat hij morgen zou komen.

... that he would come tomorrow.

PERFECT CONDITIONAL

Ik zou hebben gebeld. / Zij zou zijn gekomen.

I would have called. / She would have come.

Wij zou X -> Wij zouden

Ik zou te gaan X -> Ik zou gaan

Habitual English would often becomes the OVT: *Toen ik kind was, speelde ik buiten.*

THE QUICK TEST

1. Future seen from a past moment? Use *zou(den)*.
2. Imagined or conditional? Use *zou(den)*.
3. Softer request or advice? Use *zou(den)*.
4. Unconfirmed report? *Zou(den)* may mark distance.

USEFUL PATTERNS

zou graag - would like
zou liever - would rather
zou kunnen - could
zou moeten - should
zou mogen - would be allowed / may I
zou willen - would like

REMEMBER

Zou is singular; *zouden* is plural.
It is not always a direct translation of English *would*.
Als ik tijd had... and *Als ik tijd zou hebben...* are both standard.
Tone and context determine the exact meaning.