

The Subjunctive in Old English

The subjunctive mood is typically used in headclauses to express some sort of unreality: a wish, command, or proposed action. In subclauses it is used more widely, but it is especially common in clauses beginning with *þæt* (“that/so that/in order that”), if/then-clauses, and reported speech or opinion. This document provides examples for these most common types of subjunctive construction.

Headclauses

1. **Hortatory:** first person (plural) “Let us...”

- Herigen we ures dryhtnes naman.
- Secen we ure cyrcean mid clænnesse 7 mid hlutran mode.
- Bidden we eaðmodlice.
- Ne agymeleasien we þa teoðan sceattas to syllanne.
- Secen we soðne gefean.
- Þancien we ussum dryhtne.
- Wuldrigen we ærest ælmihtigne God.
- Wyrcean we 7 bidden we.

2. **Optative:** Expressing a wish

- Ealle hie cigdon 7 cwædon, “sie he ahungen.”

3. **Jussive:** Indirect commands in the third person

- Se þe godum offrie buton Gode anum, slea man hine.
- Geweorðe leoht.

Subclauses

1. Purpose clauses: “in order that”

- And þa beseah he hine þæt he gesawe þæne ðe þæt dyde.
- Syle me on þeowdome for hine, þæt þu þinne sunu eft onfo.
- Ða gewende he to rome be ðæs caseres hæse þæt he hine betealde gif he mihte.

2. Result clauses: “so that”

- Gif he þonne ful beo, slea man hine, þæt him forberste se sweora.

3. If/then-clauses

- Gif he godcundnysse hæbbe þonne secge he hwæt ic þence.
- Gif he losige, sie he afliemed.
- Gif hit þonne hwa do, ðonne sie he scyldig cyninges mundbyrde.

4. Concessive clauses: “although”

- Ðeah hi on ðam hade fela wundra wyrccen, eft ðonne hi to him cumað, he cuið: Gewitað from me ge unryhtwyrhtan.

5. Object clauses: “that”

- Ða se cniht bæd hine þæt he come mid him to Eufrosinan.
- Ða lærde se casere hine þæt he forlete Cristes geleafan.
- [Hie] woldon þæt mon to him gebæde 7 him ofrede.

6. Reported opinion/speech

- Hi cwædon þæt he god wære.
- Ða wurdon hi afærede 7 wendon þæt hit sum gast wære.
- Ða cwæð Iohannes to petre þæt hit wære se hælend þe on ðam strande stod.
- Ða geleaffullan cwædon þæt hit nære petrus, ac wære his engel.
- He him bocstafas arædde and arehte, hwæt seo run bode.

7. Whether/or-clauses

- Ælc ðæra manna ðe blod ytt sceal losian of his folce, beo he inlenda, beo he ælðeodig.