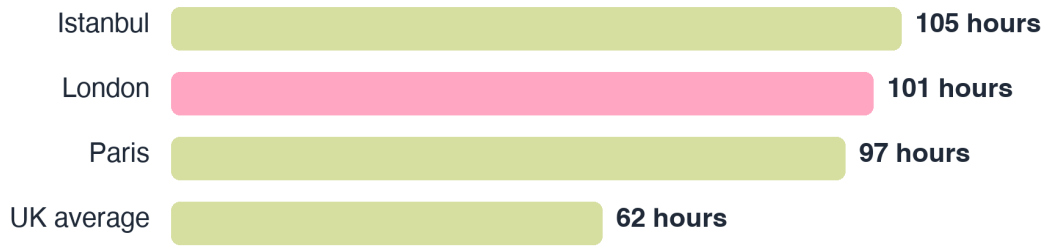
ZERO CONDITIONAL · SONG WORKSHEET

When you're late, the traffic is worse

Every big city has a traffic jam that waits for you when you are in a hurry. In 2024, drivers in London lost more time in traffic than anywhere else in Europe.



INRIX 2024 Global Traffic Scorecard. Hours each driver lost in traffic in 2024.

Does the traffic really get worse when you are late, or does it just feel that way? That feeling is the subject of a famous song.

Meet the song

Ironic · Alanis Morissette, 1995

A hit from the album *Jagged Little Pill*. The song is a list of small moments of bad luck: things that go wrong exactly when you need them not to.

Many of its lines say how life *always* behaves. That is the job of the zero conditional.



Photo: Alanis Morissette by Justin Higuchi, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons, cropped.

Listen and read

Play the song in **Spotify**, **Apple Music** or **YouTube Music** with the lyrics switched on.

Where to look	What to find
The bridge	One line about how life behaves *when you think* everything is fine.
The last verse	Two bad-luck moments, each built *It's a ... when ...*
The chorus	One *when* line with *have* + past participle, a small twist on the pattern.

Two kinds of if

Always true (zero)	One situation (first)
When you're in a hurry, every light turns red.	*If the light turns red, I'll be late.*
It happens every time.	It might happen once, in the future.
present simple + present simple	present simple + *will*

Good to know

1. **If or when?** In the zero conditional they mean the same: *If / When you heat ice, it melts.*
2. **Test it:** put *every time* in place of *if*. If the sentence still works, it's zero.
3. **Comma:** use one when the *if* part comes first. *Ice melts if you heat it* needs no comma.
4. **No will.** *When you're late, the bus comes early*, not *will come*.

Song titles and artist names are used for identification only. esl.laboratory is not affiliated with or endorsed by the artists or their labels.

Teacher's notes: a 30-minute lesson

Minutes	What to do
0-5	Show the chart. Ask: *What always goes wrong when you're in a hurry?* Write three answers on the board as *When I'm late, ...*
5-12	Play the song once for fun, then again with the lyrics on. Students do Exercise 1 while they read the bridge and last verse.
12-17	Go through *Two kinds of if*. Use the *every time* test on the board sentences.
17-30	Exercises 2 to 6 in pairs or alone. Exercise 7 for homework or as a speaking round: each student reads one rule of life.

Watch for

1. *will* after *when*: *When you will be late* (no *will* in either half).
2. Some course books file *Ironic* under the first conditional. Ask students why the bridge line is zero: it is not about one future day.

Practice

Exercise 1
Read the lyrics as you listen. Circle the right answer.

1. In the bridge, the condition starts with **if** / **when**.
2. The verbs in both halves of that line are in the **present** / **past**.
3. The line is about **one bad day** / **how life always behaves**.
4. In the last verse, each bad-luck moment uses **when** / **if**.

Exercise 2
Match the two halves of each rule of bad luck.

1. When you're in a hurry, **c**	A. it's your stop.
2. If you wash your car, **e**	B. it needs an update.
3. When you finally find a seat, **a**	C. every traffic light turns red.
4. If you buy a new phone, **d**	D. a better model comes out.
5. When you open your laptop, **b**	E. it rains the next day.

Exercise 3
Always true, or one situation in the future? Circle.

1. If you look for your keys, they're always in the last pocket. **always true** / **one situation**
2. If it rains tomorrow, I'll take the bus. **always true** / **one situation**
3. When you leave home without a coat, it gets cold. **always true** / **one situation**
4. If the shop is closed, we'll try the one next door. **always true** / **one situation**
5. If you finally buy an umbrella, the sun comes out. **always true** / **one situation**
6. When I find my keys, I'll call you. **always true** / **one situation**

Exercise 4
Complete with the present simple of the verb in brackets.

1. If you **heat** (heat) ice, it **melts** (melt).
2. When my sister **is** (be) tired, she **gets** (get) angry.
3. Plants **die** (die) if they **don't get** (not get) water.
4. When I **drink** (drink) coffee after 6 p.m., I **don't sleep** (not sleep).
5. If you **mix** (mix) red and blue, you **get** (get) purple.
6. My phone **switches** (switch) off when it **gets** (get) cold.

Exercise 5
Each sentence has one mistake. Write it correctly.

1. When you will be late, the bus is early.
   When you're late, the bus is early.
2. If you heat ice, it melted.
   If you heat ice, it melts.
3. When it rain, the streets get wet.
   When it rains, the streets get wet.
4. If you don't sleep, you are feel tired.
   If you don't sleep, you feel tired.

Exercise 6
Murphy's law: finish each rule of bad luck in your own words.

1. When you're on time for once,
   Example: When you're on time for once, the meeting starts late.
2. If you wear white,
   Example: If you wear white, you spill coffee on it.
3. When you need a pen,
   Example: When you need a pen, nobody has one.
4. If you change queues at the supermarket,
   Example: If you change queues, the other queue moves faster.

Exercise 7
Write three rules of life that are always true for you. Start with *When* or *If*.

1. **Example: When I'm hungry, I make bad decisions.**
2. **Example: If I sleep less than six hours, I get a headache.**
3. **Example: When it's sunny, I walk to work.**