The subjunctive and optative are used in all the interesting clauses. The number of different uses can seem rather intimidating to learn, and they are often translated by slippery modal verbs in English. But there are in fact a limited number of uses, and with some thought about the meaning of the different constructions they are not too difficult to translate.

It will be useful to divide the uses of the moods into two: those used in **main clauses** and those used in **subordinate clauses**. The various uses are collected and summarised below.

In both main and subordinate clauses there is a relationship between the two moods, with the subjunctive more likely and the optative less likely, the subjunctive associated with present time and the optative associated with past time.

Main clauses

The **subjunctive** is not often found in main clauses. It has two main uses:

1. In exhortations, i.e. 'let's go'
2. In prohibitions, after μή (aorist only)

These are just the positive and negative versions of each other, both expressing the speaker's will about a situation.

The **optative** has two uses in main clauses:

1. The 'potential' optative, marked by ἄν
2. The 'wish' optative, with no ἄν

The wish optative is parallel to the two uses of the subjunctive in main clauses. There is no subjunctive equivalent of the potential optative. **NB**: The two uses are distinguished by the presence or absence of ἄν (see further uses of ἄν).

The **translation** of these uses is not straightforward. We can express **wishes** with the modal verb *may*. For example:

May your days be merry and bright / And may all your Christmasses be bright!

However, we more usually express wishes in other ways. For example:

I wish it would stop raining! If only I didn't have to go to work tomorrow!

The **potential** optative is used to describe events which are speculative, and which might not happen. In English we can use a variety of modal verbs for this meaning, for example *would, could, may, might*. The best translation will depend on the context.

Main clause examples of the moods:

- hortative subjunctive

φέρ' ἐς πυρὰν δράμωμεν· ὡς κάλλιστά μοι
σὺν τῇδε πατρίδι κατθανεῖν πυρουμένῃ.
Come on, lets run to the fire. It would be much the best for me to die together with this city as it burnt.
(Euripides Troades 1281-2)

- prohibition subjunctive (aorist)

οὕτως ἔδεισας μὴ οὐ κακὴν δάμαρτ' ἔχῃς.
You were so afraid that you would lose your terrible wife.
(Euripides Andromache 626)

- wish optative

τί δῆτα μέλλεις; ὡς ἐμοὶ τῶν σῶν λόγων
ἀρεστὸν οὐδὲν μηδ' ἀρεσθείη ποτέ·
Why then are you waiting? None of my arguments are acceptable to you - and may they never be so!
(Sophocles Antigone 499-500)

- potential optative with ἄν

τίς γὰρ ἂν ἢ λόγος ἢ χρόνος ἢ ῥήτωρ ἱκανὸς γένοιτο μηνῦσαι τὴν τῶν ἐνθάδε κειμένων ἀνδρῶν ἀρετήν;
What speech, what time, what speaker would be enough to describe the virtue of these men lying

here?

(Lysias Speeches 2.55)

Summary of main clause uses:

	Subjunctive	**Optative**
will	hortative	wish
	prohibition	negative wish
no will		potential optative (with ἄν)

Subordinate clauses

In subordinate clauses, too, there is a clear parallel between the two moods. There are 4 main different types:

1. Conditionals
2. Purpose and fear clauses
3. General

4. Indirect speech

Conditionals

In conditionals, the subjunctive is found in the future real type, and the optative is found in the future unreal type. The difference between the two moods here thus corresponds to a **degree of likelihood**.

For example:

- future real conditional

καὶ ἐάν τινα αἰσθανώμεθα ἐναντίον τῇ ὀλιγαρχίᾳ, ὅσον δυνάμεθα ἐκποδὼν ποιούμεθα·

Now if we find anyone opposed to the oligarchy, we will get rid of him as far as we can.

(Xenophon Hellenica 2.3.24)

- future unreal conditional

τούτοις τοῦτο πᾶσιν ἀνδάνειν

λέγοιτ' ἄν, εἰ μὴ γλῶσσαν ἐγκλῄοι φόβος.

This would be described as pleasing everyone if fear did not block their tongues.

(Sophocles Antigone 504-5)

Purpose and fear clauses

In purpose and fear clauses the choice of mood depends on the **time-reference** of the main clause of the sentence. The subjunctive is used with main verbs in a 'primary' tense (referring to the present time). The optative is usually found when the main verb is in a 'secondary' tense (referring to a past time). This is known as the **sequence of moods**.

Occasionally, the subjunctive is found after past main verbs. This is often called the **vivid** use of the subjunctive as it is more closely represents the original thoughts of the speaker. The subjunctive is also used when the purpose is yet to be fulfilled.

For example:

- subjunctive in a purpose clause in primary sequence:

ἀλλ', ὦ γεραιὲ πούς, ἐπίσπευσον μόλις,

ὡς ἀσπάσωμαι τὴν ταλαίπωρον πόλιν.

My old foot, keep going a little more

So that I can bid farewell to my poor city.

(Euripides Troades 1275-6)

- optative in a purpose clause in secondary sequence:

οὔ σέ γ' ἔπειτα ἴδον, κούρη Διός, οὐδ' ἐνόησα

νηὸς ἐμῆς ἐπιβᾶσαν, ὅπως τί μοι ἄλγος ἀλάλκοις.

I did not see you then, and I did not spot you getting on my ship to protect me from harm.

(Homer Odyssey 13.318-19)

- subjunctive in a purpose clause in secondary sequence: (vivid)

προϊόντος δὲ τοῦ χρόνου, ὦ ἄνδρες, ἦκον μὲν ἀπροσδοκήτως ἐξ ἀγροῦ, μετὰ δὲ τὸ δεῖπνον τὸ παιδίον ἐβόα καὶ ἐδυσκόλαινεν ὑπὸ τῆς θεραπαίνης ἐπίτηδες λυπούμενον, ἵνα ταῦτα ποιῇ·

Time went on, gentlemen, and I came back unexpectedly from the fields. After dinner, the child was screaming and fretting because it was being annoyed on purpose by the maidservant to do that.

(Lysias Speeches 1.11)

General

General clauses are relative, conditional or temporal clauses that do not refer to a specific event. They can be marked by the word *ever* in English. For example:

Whenever I visit my mother I take her some flowers

In the *general present* (as in the example above) these clauses take the subjunctive **with** ἄν.

They *can* take the optative if the events would happen in the past. (The other, more usual option for the latter type is the imperfect indicative).

Here again, the different moods are used in association with a different tense, though this is rather different from the sequence of moods seen with purpose and fear clauses, as here it is the time-reference of the subordinate clause which is relevant rather than the time-reference of the main clause.

For example:

- subjunctive referring to general present

ἐν τῷδε γὰρ κάμνουσιν αἱ πολλαὶ πόλεις,
ὅταν τις ἐσθλὸς καὶ πρόθυμος ὢν ἀνὴρ
μηδὲν φέρηται τῶν κακιόνων πλέον.

Many cities struggle when good men get no more than their inferiors.

(Euripides Hecuba 306-8)

- optative referring to general past

ἵνα δὲ μή, ὁπότε λοῦσθαι δέοι, κινδυνεύῃ κατὰ τῆς κλίμακος καταβαίνουσα, ἐγὼ μὲν ἄνω διῃτώμην, αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες κάτω.

So that my wife did not endanger herself going down the stairs when he needed washing, I lived upstairs and the women lived downstairs.

(Lysias Speeches 1.9)

Indirect speech

There are various ways of expressing indirect speech, but one of them is the finite construction, after the conjunctions ὅτι and ὡς.

In this construction, the **indicative** is used when the main clause is in a 'primary' tense, and the **optative** is usually used when the main clause is in a 'secondary' tense. (Again, the indicative can replace the optative to be **vivid**). This is sometimes known as the *oblique optative*, after the Latin term for indirect speech, *oratio obliqua*, so it might as well be called the **indirect optative** . The optative is found in the tense of the words as originally spoken. This, therefore, is the only construction the **future optative** is found. **NB** This is the exception among subordinate clause uses of the moods as the optative is found without a parallel use of the subjunctive. For example:

ἔνθα δὴ προσέρχεται Ξενοφῶντι τῶν πελταστῶν ἀνὴρ Ἀθήνησι φάσκων δεδουλευκέναι, λέγων ὅτι γιγνώσκοι τὴν φωνὴν τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

Then one of the peltasts came up to Xenophon claiming to be a slave and saying that he knew the language of the enemy.

(Xenophon Anabasis 4.8)

Summary of subordinate uses

	Subjunctive	**Optative**
conditional	future real	future unreal
purpose/fear	primary sequence	secondary sequence
general	present time (with ἄν)	past time (rare, imperfect indicative more usually found)
indirect speech		indirect optative

Overview

- The subjunctive and optative are used in both main and subordinate clauses.
- In most cases there is clear parallelism between the two moods.
- There are two uses of the optative which are not parallelled by the subjunctive.

	Subjunctive	**Optative**
will	hortative	wish
	prohibition	negative wish
no will		potential optative (with ἄν)
conditional	future real	future unreal
purpose/fear	primary sequence	secondary sequence
general	present time (with ἄν)	past time (rare, imperfect indicative more usually found)
indirect speech		indirect optative