

4

The Pasts**More on *Would***

There's a fine point of distinction between *used to* and *would* in discussing events of the past. Remember that one of the meanings of *used to* is that the activity or state of being took place over a relatively long period of time. Now let's see if you discern any difference between the following sentences. Check the boxes for the statements you agree with.

1. I used to play chess with my roommate.
 2. I would play chess with my roommate.
- Both sentences can stand alone.
 Sentence 1 offers more information than Sentence 2.
 Sentence 2 offers more information than Sentence 1.

Most native speakers would only check off the **second box**. The reason is that only Sentence 1 can stand alone; it doesn't need anything added to be a complete idea because we have enough information in the expression *used to* to feel comfortable with it.

Sentence 2 doesn't supply us with enough information and creates some sort of gap in our understanding of the idea. But what if I add some more information? Let me try it:

When I was in college, I would play chess with my roommate.

Suddenly it works! That extra information about when this chess-playing happened has now made the sentence a more complete idea. What if I were to substitute *would* with *used to*? The sentence would now read:

When I was in college, I used to play chess with my roommate.

Is there any major difference between the two sentences now? No, not really. The commonality between *used to* and *would* is that we understand they both took place over a rather long period of time in the past, but the sentence that contains *would* seems to suggest that this was traditional, something done routinely, and there's a tie-in with another activity, namely, being in college. We should keep in mind that the addition of the word *would* is really superfluous—even redundant—because most everyone can arrive at the same interpretation with just the use of the simple past; the clause “When I was in college . . .” prepares us for this meaning. So it is in general with the word *would*. There's really no need for it; we use it simply for reinforcement. The big difference between *used to* and *would* that we should keep in mind is that ***used to* doesn't necessarily need extra information about the time period in order to stand alone; *would* must have this extra information, that is, a time phrase.**

One other way we use *would* is to communicate that certain activities were in a sequence as well as parts of a routine. Look at the following passage which demonstrates this use:

During my high school years, I would get up at 6:00 a.m. I'd take a shower and wake up my little brother. After that, I'd get dressed and go to the kitchen to make my own breakfast. I wouldn't eat much, just some toast and cheese, and I'd have some coffee, too.

It's clear that the word *would* serves to reinforce the routine nature of these activities and gives us to understand that they were more or less a set pattern in this person's daily life. Would the passage convey the same feeling if the word *would* were eliminated and replaced with just the simple past? Let's take a look and see.

During my high school years, I got up at 6:00 a.m. I took a shower and woke up my little brother. After that, I got dressed and went to the kitchen to make my own breakfast. I didn't eat much, just some toast and cheese, and I had some coffee, too.

What difference, if any, is there now that the simple past has replaced the word *would*? Most people agree that there's no real difference, but we tend to lose something by eliminating the word *would*, which helps us remember that we're listening to or reading about someone's past *routine* activities. This isn't to say that we should use *would* before every single verb, which is something students are prone to do once they've learned this use of *would*. The best plan is to have students practice using a combination of *would* and the simple past to enrich the communication.

What about *used to*? Can we apply this expression in place of *would*? Yes, we can, even though there's that slight change in focus since *used to* includes the idea that this description might not be true nowadays.

“Would” in a Nutshell

- 🥜 **can be used the same way as *used to*, but doesn't necessarily imply that the contrary is true now:**
Even as a child, I would have coffee in the morning.
- 🥜 **tends to communicate that the past activities mentioned were parts of a routine and must be used with a clause that supplies additional information to place it accurately in a time frame:**
During those long winters when I lived up north, I'd start a fire in the fireplace after waking up, and then I'd boil some water for tea.