Verbal Moodswings

Verbs, like the rest of us, have various moods. These moods indicate the way a speaker or writer feels about the ideas (s)he expresses. Facts, opinions, and inquiries all use verbs in the indicative mood; requests and commands require the imperative mood; and wishes, requirements, and conditions contrary to fact are expressed in the subjunctive mood. For example:

- I burned the evidence. (Indicative)
- Burn the evidence. (Imperative)
- If I were to burn the evidence, I might escape justice. (Subjunctive)

The indicative is the most commonly used of the three moods. It is used to
1) state facts:
- Pigs cannot fly.
2) express opinions:
- She eats like a pig.
3) and pose questions:
- Do you think my new nose makes me look like a pig?

Imperative mood is used to voice
1) orders:
- Kiss me, you fool!
2) and requests:
- Please don’t mind him; he reads too many romances.

Imperative statements always use the base form of the verb, and their subject, the understood "you" rarely appears in the sentence.

The subjunctive mood appears in four kinds of dependent clauses:
1) those expressing wishes:
- I wish I were a glamorous movie star.
2) those beginning with "if" and describing a situation that does not exist:
- If I could tell a better lie, I wouldn’t be in this jam.
3) those beginning with "as if" and "as though:"
- He ate the ice cream slowly, as though it were his last meal.
4) and those beginning with "that" and expressing demands, requests, requirements, or suggestions:
- I suggest that you cease that annoying behavior immediately.

For suggestions and requirements, use the base form with all subjects:
- It is essential that he understand me.
- I suggest that you return her navy pumps immediately.

When expressing a desire or a condition contrary to fact in the present, use the past tense:
- I wish my boyfriend liked to dance.

For the verb "to be," use "were" no matter what the subject:
- If you were older, you would be less certain.
- I wish I were an Oscar Mayer wiener.

For past conditions contrary to fact, use the past perfect:
- If he had been on time, he would still have a job.