Future forms

In English there is no future tense: in fact, finite verbs phrases are only marked for present and past tense. When we talk about the “future”, therefore, we refer to a concept rather than to a grammatical category. The same applies to the ‘conditional’ and the ‘subjunctive’, which are not expressed through morphological inflection, either.

There are many different ways of referring to the future, depending on how we see a future event: we can, for example, make a prediction, talk about a plan, an intention, or an event which we think is about to happen.

The future constitutes a complex area of grammar. Frequently more than one form can be used, usually with a (slight) difference in meaning; yet there is often one structure which appears to be the most appropriate in a given context: using the future effectively, therefore, is often a question of choosing the best form among those available.

Future time is expressed through the modals will and shall, semi-modal be going to or the present tense, simple and continuous. Normally, the present-tense forms are used when future events are seen as relatively near or considered to have some kind of connection with the present moment in terms of the speaker’s intentions or plans, or the inevitability of a certain event. Instead, will and shall are used to refer to temporally remote events (but by no means only to remote events).

The will/shall future

Forms

| affirmative: I/we shall/will; you/he/they will + bare infinitive | negative: I/we shall/will not; you/he/they will not + bare infinitive | interrogative: shall/will I … ?; will you/he/they …? + bare infinitive | contractions: ’ll for shall and will; shan’t for shall not; won’t for will not |

Shall is not normally used in American English. In British English it can be used in the first person singular and plural, but it is a much less common form than will, found especially in formal written English. Undoubtedly, the fact that both will and shall have the same contracted form (’ll) has favoured the trend toward using will for all persons.

The will future is also called “future simple” or “pure” future: actually, when used for predictions, will does not convey extra-temporal meaning, contrary to the other future constructions, which express intention, arrangement, planning, or inevitability. That explains why will is the form preferred in formal written English: its neutrality helps give a sense of impersonality and detachment to the words of the writer.

The future simple is used to make predictions about the future and to give or ask for information regarding future events:

*The ceremony will be simple but moving*  
*He’ll be back in an hour*  
*Will she be at the party?*

Predictions can also be used as a way of giving orders, as the following examples show:

*You’ll take care of the publication of the conference proceedings*  
*You will finish work at 5.30 p.m.  

The future simple can be used to announce official plans and arrangements; therefore, it is often found in newspapers and heard on television and the radio:

*A Cabinet meeting will be held tomorrow morning*
Will is found after verbs such as think, hope, expect, suppose, assume, doubt, be sure etc. to express thoughts, hopes, expectations, beliefs and doubts about the future:

I doubt they’ll be here in time
I assume that the plan will succeed

The future simple is also used, in the main clause, in time and conditional sentences. Of course, the condition does not necessarily have to be explicitly expressed:

I’ll give you a call when they get here
If I pass the test, I’ll buy you all a drink
You’ll be fired (if you don’t work harder)

Often, the future simple and the present-tense forms are possible with similar meaning. However, as has already been noticed, contrary to will the present continuous and be going to are characterized by current orientation: as we shall see below in more detail, they refer to fixed (and therefore existing in the present) plans and emphasize the present intention of the subject or the sense of inevitability (normally in the near future) of a given event. Compare:

The film is coming out / will come out before Christmas
The Democrats will win / are going to win the elections

The be going to future

Forms

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<td>interrogative</td>
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Be going to is generally used in a less formal style. It can be used with both stative and dynamic verbs, and with or without human agency; thus, as we shall see below, be going to does not have the limitations which are typical of the present continuous. The forms going to go and going to come are possible but tend to be avoided.

Both be going to and will can express an intention about the future. Yet will is used when the intention is not formed in advance (the decision to do something is made at the time of speaking); be going to when it is formed in advance (the decision is made before the time of speaking):

I’m going to invite her out tonight
I’ll answer the phone

Be going to is also used to make predictions of events that are about to happen based on something we know or observe in the present, thus conveying a “sense of inevitability” of a future event. Though it is mostly used to refer to the immediate future, be going to is not limited to events which are very close in time. The important thing is for the speaker to think such events will take place based on present evidence:

She’s going to divorce him one day
The economy is going to stagnate for a long time
He’s going to be sentenced to life imprisonment
While *be going to* is used to make predictions in connection with outside present evidence, *will* is preferred when there is no such external evidence but we are talking about what is inside our heads, that is to say about what we think or know will happen in the future:

*He’s going to score. He never misses a penalty*
*I expect that a major crisis will bring down this Government sooner or later*

In an informal style, the *be going to* future often substitutes for predictive *will*:

*The Cabinet will meet / is going to meet next week*

*Be going to* can express a command and be used for refusals, though the present continuous is more typical in the latter case:

*You are going to finish your porridge!*
*You’re not going to park your car here!*
*I’m not going to carry this heavy suitcase!*

### The present continuous as future

**Forms**

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The *present continuous* is used to express planned future arrangements, usually accompanied by a future time adverb. When there is no time adverb, the context will help clarify if the sentence refers to the present or future time:

*He’s playing tennis tomorrow morning*
*He’s playing tennis (now)*

Needless to say, the *present continuous* as future is possible only with verbs that take the progressive form. Being connected to the idea of planning, the *present continuous* does not normally refer to events that are outside people’s control, and therefore can only be used with human agents (or human by extension). On the contrary, *be going to* is not limited to events which are within the sphere of human influence:

*His health is going to improve soon* (not: *His health is improving soon*)

Plans and arrangements are not usually made for events which are too remote in time: that is what makes them stand. It is only to be expected, therefore, that the *present continuous* generally indicates a relatively near (or anyway not too distant) future:

*I’m spending the summer in London this year*
*The debate is starting at 8 p.m.*

The *present continuous* can also be used to refer to actions that are just starting:

*See you guys, I’m heading for the office*
The present continuous and the be going to futures can be used to express virtually the same meaning. Yet, as we have seen, the present continuous emphasizes planning and previous arrangement, and it is not normally used with activities that do not involve planning, whereas be going to lays emphasis on intention and previous decision. Thus, for instance, it is more natural to ask someone what they are doing on Saturday night than what they are going to do, since people usually go out on Saturdays and often decide in advance how to spend their night.

At times, the difference between the two present-tense future forms can be more than just a question of emphasis. Compare:

The Foreign Minister is meeting the Iranian ambassador in order to solve the hostage crisis (the Government has already taken action to solve the crisis)
The Foreign Minister is going to call the Iranian ambassador to find a solution to the hostage crisis (intentions are not enough – criticisms can be levelled at the Government)

Finally, the present continuous is common in emphatic refusals (more common than be going to), while both the present continuous and be going to can be used to give a command, to insist that people do or not do something:

I’m not cooking for you!
You’re tidying up / going to tidy up your room before you leave!
You’re not partying / going to party every night!

Present simple as future

It is used to talk about fixed plans, programmed events, people’s schedules such as travel itineraries, organized trips and the like. The timing of the event is fixed in advance by timetables, official bodies or organizations:

Classes start next week
The American President meets the European leaders tomorrow in New York
Her new book comes out in November
Our plane leaves at 10.30

The present simple is also used to refer to future events in clauses of time and condition following if, unless, as long as, when, as soon as, before, after, until, by the time etc.:

We’ll try until we succeed
You won’t pass the test unless you study
By the time we get there, the match will be over

* After a conjunction of time or in conditional sentences we can also use the present continuous or the present perfect to refer to the future:

I’ll call you when I’m coming back
We’ll think about having a baby when we have redeemed our mortgage
I’ll pay you as soon as you have finished the work
Unless it has a strong, volitional meaning, in subordinate clauses will + infinitive is generally substituted by the present tense not only after conjunctions of time and in conditional sentences but also after relatives and questions words:

- A cash reward will be given to people who assist the police in their investigations
- Call him. He will tell you why he arrives tomorrow

In comparative sentences with as and than both the future and the present are possible:

- I’ll learn how to use this program sooner than you do/will
- I’ll get as many job offers as you do/will

**The future continuous**

The construction will + be + -ing form is used to talk about actions/processes in progress at a particular time in the future. Needless to say, it is not used with verbs which do not normally take the progressive form:

- Don’t call on him early in the afternoon. He’ll be sleeping
- Thank God, in a few days I’ll just be lying on the beach

This construction also refers to something which will happen in the future as part of the ordinary course of events, of fixed plans or schedules. The progressive will future sounds casual and matter-of-fact:

- Tomorrow morning, as usual, I’ll be seeing students in my office
- We will be leaving at seven o’clock

The future continuous can be used to ask about somebody’s plans in a polite way. Since it does not refer to personal intentions, this structure is particularly appropriate to enquire about people’s plans in a polite, neutral way:

- Will you be working on Saturday morning?
- Will you be joining us tonight?

Lastly, the future continuous is used to talk about what we assume is happening or what we think someone else is doing now:

- Let’s not disturb him now. I’m sure he’ll be studying

In general, tense simplification in subordinate clauses occurs when the meaning in the main sentence and the time referred to by the speaker/writer are clear. In addition to the present tense taking the place of the will future, the past simple is used instead of the conditional, the present perfect and past perfect:

- I would never do something that endangered/would endanger my health
- I had not eaten the food that they cooked/had cooked for me
The future perfect

The future perfect is formed by will/shall + have + past participle. It is used to talk about something which will, or won’t, be finished or completed by a certain time in the future:

- I won’t have finished this book by tomorrow
- The bridge will have been built two years from now

The continuous form of the future perfect refers to an action or process that, at a given point in the future, will have continued for a period of time. In this case, the emphasis is on activity rather than completion of the action:

- We’ll have been working on this project for two years next month

The future perfect is also used to make a prediction about what we think has probably happened:

- Why don’t you call her? She will have returned from work by now
- You will have heard of his new novel, I suppose

The future in the past

In order to talk about an event which was in the future at a certain time in the past we can use the past forms of the various future structures, namely should/would instead of shall/will, was/were going to instead of am/are/is going to, the past progressive instead of the present progressive, was/were to instead of are/is to:

- He said he would send them a postcard
- The ceremony was beginning at 7 p.m.
- They were going to argue again

Note that, in the first example above, would is not followed by a perfect infinitive, as it is in Italian (Disse che gli avrebbe mandato una cartolina). Conversely, an Italian sentence such as Pensavo che avremmo vinto il torneo must be translated into English as I thought we would win the tournament.

In English, would is followed by perfect infinitives in Type 3 conditional sentences:

- If you had worked harder, you would have finished by now