

Tense Confusion: Expressing Future Time

Introduction

Both English second language learners and native speakers are surprised to learn that there is technically no future tense in English, only different ways of expressing the future. If you learned in your ESL class that the future in English is *will*, then this handout will introduce you to some of the varied and often confusing ways the future is conveyed.

1. *Will* versus *be going to*

The decision to use either *will* or *be going to* depends upon the intention of the speaker or writer. In some cases, both forms are used interchangeably; the confusion arises when only one form would be used. For example, you want to bring some chips to a party. Is it a promise? *I promise that I will bring chips.* Is it a plan? *I am going to bring chips.* Is it an intention? *I'll bring chips.*

The following table will help you decide which form is most appropriate for your intended use.

Use	Will	Be going to
¹ Future facts	<i>Nicolas will be 30 in June.</i>	<i>Nicolas is going to be 30 in June.</i>
¹ General predictions	<i>In the next century, humans will live on Mars.</i>	<i>In the next century, humans are going to live on Mars.</i>
² Predictions with evidence	<i>Look at those dark clouds on the horizon. It will rain.</i>	<i>Look at those dark clouds on the horizon. It's going to rain.</i>
² Planned events/intentions	<i>I can't go to the concert this evening. I will study.</i>	<i>I can't go to the concert this evening. I am going to study.</i>
³ Quick decisions/intentions (made at the time of speaking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you cold? I'll close the window. • Your roommate is complaining. You reply, "Don't worry. I'll wash the dishes tomorrow." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Are you cold? I'm going to close the window.</i> • <i>Your roommate is complaining. You reply, "Don't worry. I'm going to wash the dishes tomorrow."</i>
⁴ Solemn promises	<i>I promise that I will love you forever.</i>	<i>I promise that I am going to love you forever.</i>

Explanations:

¹In these cases, both *will* and *be going to* are used interchangeably for the future.

²When future events are a projection of events or ideas that are occurring now (predictions with evidence) or are planned to occur (planned events), *be going to* is

preferred. This makes sense as *be going to* is a present continuous form that would by definition refer to an action that starts before now and ends sometime after now.

³The modal auxiliary *will* is grounded at the moment of speaking and is, therefore, used for future events decided at the time of speaking. In these cases, the contracted form *'ll* is usually used.

⁴ As a modal auxiliary verb, *will* implies 100% certainty. Therefore, the use of *will* in a solemn promise assures the reader or listener that the promised action will follow.

Note: *Be going to* is often contracted to *gonna* in speech. *Gonna* is not a real word in English and must never be used in academic writing.

2. Using the simple present for the future

The simple present tense is used to denote facts; therefore, future events that are seen as unchanging can be expressed using the simple present. This is most often used with schedules and timetables. A future context is either explicit (e.g., tomorrow) or implied (e.g., winter session).

*The bus for Montreal **leaves** tomorrow at noon.*

*Winter session **starts** on January 8.*

3. Using the present progressive for the future

The present progressive can be used for future planned events or arrangements as a shortened form of *be going to*.

*I **am going to fly** to Paris tomorrow. = I **am flying** to Paris tomorrow.*

*I **am going to finish** my project by next week. = I **am finishing** my project next week.*

4. Modal auxiliaries used to express the future

Modal auxiliaries can be used with a *time indicator* to express the future.

*Kristen **should deliver** the results of our study **next week**.*

*You **can borrow** my book **after class**.*

*Students **must complete** their portfolios by **the end of the session**.*

5. The future in dependent time and *if* clauses

Dependent clauses contain subjects and verbs but cannot stand alone as complete sentences; thus, they are connected to independent clauses. Time clauses (starting with subordinate conjunctions including **when**, **while**, and **as soon as**) and conditional clauses (starting with conjunctions including **if** and **unless**) are written in the present even with future meanings. The future is expressed in the independent clause.

*Martha **will go (future)** to the party **if she finishes (present)** work on time.*

***As soon as I finish (present)** my essay, I **am going to (future)** the gym.*

*The students **will be (future)** happy **when classes end (present)**.*

