

3.05 Talking about the future

This is a tricky area of English! There are various ways of referring to the future, and often two or more of these structures can have the same meaning. It is often a case of 'knowing' which one sounds the most natural.

BEWARE! Many students, particularly in spoken English, tend to use *will* too much for the future, perhaps because of poor teaching in the past. *Will* is **one way** of referring to the future, it is not the only way: *will* is **not** 'the future tense' in English; it has many other uses.

Usually, we use the following structures to talk about the future: **present progressive** (I'm seeing); "**going to**" (I'm going to see); **present simple** (I see); **will** (I will see).

Here are some examples:

PRESENT PROGRESSIVE

This tense is often used when we want to talk about what has been arranged for the future; events over which we or others have some control.

*What **are you doing** tonight? (NOT *What will you do tonight?* NOR *What do you do tonight?*)*

*I'm **looking** after their cat while they're on holiday next month.*

*When **is he starting** his new job?*

As previously stated, in many instances *going to* or the present simple could also be used to talk about plans (but usually NOT *will!*)

GOING TO

Going to is often interchangeable with the present progressive, but its use does emphasise the idea of a **decision** that has been made. It is also used to make predictions based on present evidence, on what we can see in front of us, for example.

*I'm **going to go** on a diet next week.*

*What are you **going to wear** for the party?*

*Have you seen the state of the roads? I'm **going to write** to the council!*

*He's playing terribly now! He's **going to lose!***

*Hold me! I think I'm **going to faint!***

Again, *will* would not be possible in any of the above examples.

PRESENT SIMPLE

The present simple has two specific uses in talking about the future - it could not be used in the examples above.

(i) subordinate clauses

After words such as *if, when, while, unless*, where etc the present simple is used in subordinate clauses to refer to the future:

*When I **get** back I'll give you a ring.*

*If I **pass** all my exams next month I'm going to have a holiday.*

*The match will have to be delayed unless the weather **improves** soon.*

(ii) timetables, schedules etc

If events or actions take place within a fixed timetable or schedule, then the present simple is often used.

*What time **does** the **bank** open tomorrow?*

*The holiday sounds great. First we **spend** two nights in Lima and on Sunday we **fly** to the mountains.*

*Next term **starts** on October 1st.*

WILL

Will is used:

(i) To talk about the future when none of the present tenses described above would be suitable. This would often mean in cases where there is no obvious link to the present.

*The office **will be** open all summer.*

*This essay **will discuss** the consequences of the agreement.*

(ii) To make predictions when there is no concrete evidence available:

*I reckon Worcestershire **will win** the championship.*

*What **will you do** if you don't get the job?*

Compare:

*He's playing terribly! He's **going to lose!*** (You can see him playing badly now)

with

*Do you think **he'll win** next year?* (You'd just be guessing)

(iii) In conditionals, when you say what will happen if or when something else happens:

*If interest rates fall further, people will **be deterred** from saving. You'll **have to ask** nicely if you want to borrow that much.*

See guide 3.7 (Modal auxiliary verbs) for 'non-future' uses of will.

OTHER WAYS OF TALKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

The Future Perfect

This tense is used to express the idea that something will have been done by a certain time in the future.

*By September **I'll have been** here for five years.*

*When you come back from holiday the work **will have been completed**.*

The Future Progressive

Used to say that something will be in progress at a certain time in the future.

*At this time tomorrow **I'll be** driving through France.*

***I'll be thinking** of you while you're doing your exam.*

The tense is also used in a similar way to the present tenses, to refer to fixed or decided events, but not always with the idea of personal intention:

***I'll be doing** more teaching next year.*

***I'll be calling** for you at about 10.*

*The train **will be making** a special stop at Preston.*

Other constructions

'To be to'

*The Queen **is to meet** the Pope on her visit to Rome.*

'To be about to'/'To be on the point of'

*I'm **about to give up** on this essay. The **talks are on the point of** collapsing.*