

The Future Tense

In English, there is no way to mark the future tense with a verb form. Rather, the future is indicated with a verb phrase. There are two major ways to do so: **Will + infinitive** or **going to + infinitive**. Sometimes the difference between them is very small:

- John'll / John's **going to** meet us in the restaurant at 8 o'clock.
- **Will you / Are you going to** come back this evening?

However, **going to** is preferred in spoken English and **will** is preferred in formal written English. You can also use the continuous present to indicate the future based on context, such as: *I am having lunch with my advisor on Thursday*. The difference between each form of future tense is outlined below.

Will/shall + infinitive

Will is often used as a contraction with the pronoun that is the subject of the verb indication future tense (*I'll/(s)he'll/they'll...*)

We use **will/shall** when we decide to do something at the time of speaking, but NOT to talk about something you've already arranged to do:

- I'm going on holiday next week NOT I'll go on holiday next week.
- It's late. I think **I'll** go to bed now

However, notice that in a formal style, we use **will** rather than **going to** to talk about future events that have been previously arranged in some detail:

- The meeting **will** begin at 10.00 am. Coffee **will** be available from 9.30 onwards.

Also, if we make a prediction based on our opinion or our past experience we use **will**:

- Why don't you come over this weekend? The children **will** enjoy seeing you again.

I imagine the stadium **will** be full for the game on Saturday.

You can also use it when you:

offer to do something (I'll wash the dishes.)

agree to do something (I'll talk to her about it on Monday.)

promise to do something (I'll never let you go.)

ask somebody to do something (Will you close the door?)

Be going to + infinitive

You can use **be going to + infinitive** to explain what you have already arranged to do.

- She is going to the doctor's on Wednesday afternoon
- They are going to go swimming at the gym this afternoon.

We also use **going to** instead of **will** when we PREDICT that something will happen in the future because we have some evidence for it now. It may be that we predict an event that is just about to happen on the basis of something that we feel, see (etc.) now, or because we have been told that it will happen:

- What's that matter with her? She thinks she's **going to** faint.
- The sky is cloudy - I think it's **going to** rain.
- Did you know that Bob and Kathy **are going to** get married?

We tend to avoid **going to + go** and use the present continuous form of **go** instead:

- I'm **going** to town on Saturday, (*rather than* I'm going to go to town...)
- Alice is **going** to university next year, (*rather than* ...is going to go to university)

Be going to can be used for past as well: "was going to" refers to a projected time from a point in the past:

- It was August and **he was going** to start school.

Present Continuous (with context)

In addition to **going to + infinitive**, you can also use present continuous to talk about activities and events that are intended or have already been arranged:

- She's **making** a speech at the conference next week.
- **Are you seeing** Tony this week? (= do you have an arrangement to see him?)

When we talk about an INTENTION to do something in the future, although no definite arrangement has been made, we prefer **going to** rather than the present continuous. To emphasize that we are talking about a DEFINITE ARRANGEMENT, we prefer the present continuous. Study these sentences:

- Before I go to China next year, **I'm going to learn** some Cantonese, (*rather than* ...I'm learning some Cantonese.)
- I'm still not feeling very well, so I think I'm **going to see** the doctor some time this week, (*rather than* ...I think I'm seeing the doctor...)
- They're **leaving** from Frankfurt airport at 6.30 pm. (*rather than* They're going to leave...)

We don't use the present continuous for the future: when we make or report predictions about activities or events over which we have no control/we can't arrange these):

- I think it's **going to rain / will rain** soon, (*not* I think it's raining soon.)•
- Scientists say that the satellite **is going to fall / will fall** to Earth some time this afternoon. (*not* ...the satellite is falling...)

We also cannot use it when we talk about permanent future situations:

- People **are going to live / will live** longer in the future, (*not* ...are living...)
- The brothers **are going to own / will own** most of the buildings in the street before long. (*not* ...are owning...)

Practice Exercises

A. Choose **will ('ll)** or **(be) going to**, whichever is correct or more likely, and one of these verbs.

collapse eat explode have increase leave paint
re-open retire see show walk

Example: Get out of the building! It sounds like the generator's *going to explode*.

- James _____ early before he reaches 65. He mentioned it at the meeting recently.
- 'I think I _____ home across the park.' 'That's a good idea.'
- Can we meet at 6pm outside the station?' 'Okay. I _____ you there.'
- 'Closed over the New Year period. This office _____ on 2nd January.' (*Sign on an office window.*)
- I'm sure you _____ staying with Khalil.
- We _____ with Jose tonight. He wants us to be there at 6.00.
- 'The 4:15 to Grand Central _____ from platform 5.' (*Announcement at railway station.*)
- I wouldn't walk across that old bridge if I were you. It looks like it _____.
- I read in the paper that they the price of gas _____ again.

B. These sentences refer to the future. Correct them where necessary (with either present continuous or going to) or put Y if they are already correct. (C & D)

- Unless aid arrives within the next few days, thousands are starving.
- There are going to be more of us at the picnic than we'd thought.
- I'm tired. I'm going to go to bed.
- 'I can't go to the game after all.' 'That's a pity. Jen'll being very disappointed.'
- Clear the area! The bomb's exploding.
- In future, the company is going to be known as 'Communications International'.
- I've redecorated the bedroom. Do you think Jane is liking it when she gets home?
- Whether we like it or not, within a few years biotechnology is transforming every aspect of human life.
- It's not a deep cut, but it's leaving a scar.
- He is going to inherit his father's fortune.

Sources and Further Reading/Practice:

Biber, Douglas, Conrad, Susan and Leech, Geoffrey. *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Edinburgh Gate, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2002.

Hewings, Martin. *Advanced Grammar in Use*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Murphy, Raymond. *English Grammar in Use*. 2nd Ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003 (1985).