

Grammar review – future tense



- How many future tenses do we have in English and when are they used?
- Which one of these sentences is correct¹:

“Tomorrow, I will fly to Brazil.”
“Tomorrow, I am flying to Brazil.”
“Tomorrow, I am going to fly to Brazil.”

Will future

We use ‘will’ for the following situations.

- **Promises**

“I’ll send you the documents today.”

“I’ll check with our supplier and get back to you.”

- **Offers of help**

“I’ll phone Mike for you and ask about the project.”

- **Spontaneous decisions**

“OK, so I’ll be in charge of phase two and Frank will be in charge of the last part.”



Tip: It’s also used in restaurants when you order: “I’ll have the hamburger and chips, please”. (Even if the decision on what you are going to eat is made in the car on the way to the restaurant – we still ‘act’ as if it was spontaneous!)

¹ The second answer is correct because it is most likely a fixed plan in the future. See Present continuous for future tenses.



Tip: Spontaneous decisions often begin with the phrase “I think...” so chances are, if you use this, you should be using “will”.

- ***Predictions without evidence***

“I think this year will be a good year.” (just a feeling)

“I think in ten years’ time everyone in Germany will have a mobile phone.”



Tip: Predictions using will often express personal beliefs and/or opinions. For example: “I’m sure you will understand the assignment”.

- ***Official announcements***

“The agreement will terminate upon the closing of XYZ”.



Tip: Used a lot in contracts (see above) or official announcements from management. “There will be a company-wide meeting for all employees next Wednesday.”

Present continuous (-ing) form + timeframe

We use present continuous for fixed plans in the future – i.e. plans where we are 95-100% certain that they will take place. As certain as anyone can be of the future!

In the example sentences mentioned at the start, it is unlikely that you suddenly decide to fly to Brazil the next day therefore it will not be a spontaneous decision and therefore we cannot use will. It will have been planned in advance. Therefore we need present continuous to indicate that it is a fixed plan

(subject + verb 'to be' + infinitive + *ing*)

A few Business English examples:

"I'm having lunch with the supplier on Tuesday."

"On Monday I'm meeting the corporate team."

"Next week we're moving on to the next stage of the project."



Tip: When asking questions about somebody's future plans, native speakers always use the present continuous.

e.g. "*What are you doing at the weekend?*" is a very common phrase.



Tip: If we are not sure about our plans, we would use the will future. I.e. if we start our sentence with "probably, maybe..." or another indicator of doubt.

e.g. "I'll probably watch a movie with friends this weekend."

Simple present for future usage

Just like the German language, the English language also uses the simple present for the future. The simple present is used for **events** in the future that have been scheduled (like in a diary or a timetable).

A few Business English examples:

“The meeting starts at 5pm.”

“The train leaves at 9am.”

“The next presentation begins at 2pm.”

Compare with the present continuous: “I’m starting my job next week” (fixed plan relating to me) and “My job starts next week” (A scheduled event).



Tip: Most of the time the simple present is used for future usage when we talk about: *Meetings, conference calls, presentations, any sort of public transport (trains, planes, etc.), films, sporting events, etc.*

Going to

Going to + infinitive is used to signal an **intention**. The plan may not be 100% fixed but it is probably at least 80% fixed.

For example: "Next summer I'm going to visit my parents in England."

-> This means: I probably haven't bought the flight tickets and I may also not have chosen a specific date yet but I want to indicate that an intention is there.

It is also used for **predictions** but with **evidence** ("will", if you remember, is used for predictions without evidence)

Imagine the following situation: It's the World Cup and England are playing Germany in the semi-final. It's 0-0 after extra time and the referee signals penalties. "Oh no" I say, "England are going to lose to Germany at football again!"

Why not 'will'? Because there is evidence in the form of history to suggest that England are going to lose. Sadly for England fans such as myself, too much evidence!

Another example would be if you looked up at the sky and saw that it was grey. "It's going to rain." (The sky provides evidence for your predictions).



Tip: 'Going to' is usually used for New Years Resolutions for example. "This year I'm going to give up smoking" is definitely a mark of intent rather than a fixed plan.

Conclusion

In some situations 'going to' and present continuous are used interchangeably in the English language, depending on the context. There are only a few cases where it would sound unnatural to use one instead of the other. That said, how fixed something is, is often a subjective point.

However, the difference between 'will' and 'going to' and 'present continuous' is big and English learners should concentrate on getting that right with plenty of practice. After a while you will develop a feel for it, but before that happens, it is important to always test your answers against the rules outlined above.