Talking About the Future

English has no single future tense. Choose the form by asking: decided, arranged, timetabled, or very soon? Follow Sophia and Philo to Rome.

A2–C1 · Philo & Sophia, Lesson 4

From "I'll help you" to "I was going to..."

will — DECIDED NOW

will / 'll + verb · won't + verb

- *a decision made at the moment of speaking*
  The bags are heavy. I**'ll carry** one.
- *offers, promises and requests*
  I**'ll send** you a postcard, I promise.
- *predictions based on opinion*
  I think you**'ll love** Rome.

Often with: I think, probably, I'm sure, I promise

be going to — ALREADY PLANNED

am / is / are going to + verb

- *a plan or intention decided before now*
  We**'re going to visit** the Colosseum.
- *a prediction from evidence we can see*
  Look at those clouds. It**'s going to rain**.

will = decided now · going to = decided before

Present continuous — ARRANGED

am / is / are + -ing + future time

- *a fixed arrangement, usually with other people, a time and a place*
  Philo **is meeting** Sophia at the station at six.
- *the kind of plan you would write in a diary*
  We**'re flying** home on Sunday.

Always with a future time word, or it means now

Present simple — TIMETABLE

verb / verb + -s

- *timetables, schedules and programmes*
  The train **leaves** at 6.15.
- *after when, if, as soon as, before, until*
  Text me when you **arrive**.

Not: "when you will arrive"

be about to — VERY SOON

am / is / are about to + verb

- *something that will happen in a moment*
  Hurry! The train **is about to leave**.
- *formal: be due to (expected) · be to (official plans)*
  The museum **is due to** reopen in May.

Not with a time word: not "about to leave tomorrow"

Future continuous — IN PROGRESS

will be + -ing

- *in the middle of an action at a future time*
  This time tomorrow we**'ll be sitting** in a café in Rome.
- *a polite question about someone's plans*
  Will you **be using** the car tonight?

Often with: this time tomorrow, at 8 o'clock, all day

Future perfect — DONE BY THEN

will have + past participle

- *completed before a point in the future*
  By Sunday they **will have seen** the Colosseum.
- *continuous form for duration up to then*
  By noon we**'ll have been walking** for five hours.

Almost always with: by, by the time, before

The future in the past — PAST PLANS

was / were going to · would · was about to

- *a plan in the past, often one that changed*
  Sophia **was going to** take the bus, but she walked.
- *what was still ahead at that time*
  She didn't know that the trip **would** change her life.

Common in stories and history writing

Which future? Ask in this order

Timetable? present simple › **Arranged?** present continuous › **Decided before?** going to › **Evidence now?** going to › **Deciding now, offering, promising?** will › **In a moment?** be about to

Spanish speakers, watch out

- *Mañana voy al médico* = **I'm going** to the doctor tomorrow, not *I go*.
- *¿Te ayudo?* = **Shall I** help you? / **I'll** help you, not *I help you?*
- *Cuando llegues* = when you **arrive**, not *when you will arrive*.

Want more?

Sophia makes a wager about the future in **A Wager** (Philo & Sophia, Lesson 4).
See also Grammar Guides 5: **The Twelve Tenses**.
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