

## FUTURITY OR FUTILITY? THAT IS THE QUESTION.

“English is an unusual language in that it has no future tense.”

*“Oh yeah, pull the other one, It’s got bells on!”*

“No really. English hasn’t got a standardized future tense. Instead we use a dazzling array of auxiliary verbs and other tense forms which, by some miracle, speakers of English know that the speaker is referring to the future.”

*“Hold on, hold on, auxiliary verbs? What are they again?”*

“Words like will/have which help the main verb.”

*“I remember now. So, you mentioned ‘a dazzling array’ of forms. How many are there exactly?”*

“Exactly? Gosh, I don’t know.”

*“You don’t know? And you call yourself an English teacher?”*

“Well there are four main ones and a few others which are less common. Let’s make a start with the more common ones, shall we?”

*“Ready when you are!”*

“Well the most common way of expressing the future is simply by adding the auxiliary verb ‘**will**’ before a base verb form.”

*“Base verb form..”*

“Yes, go, play, study... Have you got any plans for tonight?”

*“Me? Tonight? No way. I’ll be here until 10 o’clock!”*

“Excellent!”

*“No it’s not. I...”*

“Your example was excellent. You made a simple **statement** about something in the future.”

“Simple, but sad.”

“Don’t look so sad! Think of the weekend! You know about the big football game on Saturday, Bristol Rovers and Liverpool...”

*“Yeah, Bristol Rovers **will thrash** Liverpool!”*

“I couldn’t have thought of a better example. In your example you were **predicting** the outcome of the football game.”

*“You mean like one of those fortune tellers who look into a crystal ball and tell you ‘You **will meet** a tall dark stranger who **will want** his wicked way with you’?”*

“Exactly! But when we are **making statements about the future** and when we are **predicting** things are not the only time we use **will future**.”

*“No?”*

“No, we also use it when we make a **spontaneous decision**.”

*“A **spontaneous decision**? Er, could you give me an example?”*

‘Sure, you’re in a restaurant and you’ve ordered your favourite meal...’

“*Pot noodle!*”

‘Okay, pot noodle. Well, the waiter comes back to you and says, ‘Terribly sorry, sir, the pot noodle is off. You reply...’

“*In that case, I’ll have some pop tarts instead!*”

‘Brilliant! A **spontaneous decision**! Another interesting point, your ‘will’ was contracted.’

“*Yeah, well, that often happens in cold weather.*”

‘No, I mean you didn’t say ‘**I will have** some pop tarts instead’. You said, ‘**I’ll have** some pop tarts instead’.’

“*But I would always use the contracted form!*”

‘So would 99% of the population. In fact it can sound aggressive if you tell a waiter ‘**I will have** some pop tarts’. Apparently you’re not supposed to use contracted forms when you’re writing in English but lots of people do.’

“*Okay, I’ve got it so far: I use **will future** when I’m **predicting** things, like a football match. I also use **will future** when I make a **spontaneous decision**, like when I have to change my order in a restaurant.*”

‘Perfect! Now things start to get interesting.’

“*Do you mean interesting or difficult?*”

‘Just interesting to an intellectual like yourself.’

“*Gosh, thanks.*”

‘Okay, now do you remember that guy who cheated you out of £100 in that poker game last week?’

“*That little guy with red hair and funny chin?*”

‘That’s the one. What do you **intend** to do if you see him again?’

“*I’m **gonna kick** his head in!*”

‘Could you say that a little more slowly?’

‘I’m **going to kick** his head in!’

‘Great!’

“*I thought you didn’t approve of violence.*”

‘I said ‘great’ because of your excellent example! You told me of your **intention**. What you are **going to do** when you see the little guy with the red hair and the funny chin.’

“*Aha! So that’s another way of talking about the future, using ‘**going to**’! when I tell you what I **intend to do**!*”

‘That’s right!’

“*I’m **gonna be** a brilliant teacher like you.*”

‘You are **going to be** a brilliant teacher like me.’

“*I’m glad you agree!*”

‘I was simply correcting your sloppy English. Try to say ‘**going to**’ instead of ‘**gonna**.’’

*“I’ll try, but it sounds very normal to me.”*

“Okay, there’s another time when we use ‘ **going to**’.”

*“There is?”*

“There certainly is. Do you know that trainee teacher called Wayne?”

*“Wayne? The guy’s a complete airhead. He never comes to lectures. He hasn’t done any extra reading. He spends about five minutes planning his lessons and they’re all crap anyway...”*

“Yes, I think we’re talking about the same person. Okay, do you think **he’s going to get** his certificate.”

*“No way! **He’s going to fail** the course!”*

“On what **evidence** do you base your damning judgement?”

*“On the fact that he is a lazy airhead who never does any work!”*

“So, you are looking at some kind of **evidence** about Wayne’s future.”

*“Oh, I get you. This is another future form. When there is **evidence** of something ‘**going to happen**’ then we use the ‘**going to**’ future.”*

“That’s right. Look outside. What can you see?”

*“Big black clouds heading in this direction.”*

“How convenient. So, we have our **evidence**. What do you think **is going to happen**?”

*“It’s **going to rain**!”*

“And you know that because of the **evidence** of the black clouds.”

*“Right! Okay, let me get this straight before we go on. In fact, I’ll produce a little table and you can tell me what you think of it.”*

FORM	USED	EXAMPLE
will	statements/prediction	<i>I’ll be here until 10 o’clock. Bristol Rovers will thrash Liverpool on Saturday.</i>
will	spontaneous decision	<i>In that case I’ll have some pop tarts instead</i>
going to	intention	<i>I’m going to kick your head in!</i>
going to	based on evidence	<i>Wayne is going to fail the course!</i>

*“Like it?”*

“Like it? I love it. In fact I’ll copy it and give it out to my students.”

*“Let’s get back to more serious things. I’m enjoying this!”*

“Good point, we still have another six forms to look at.”

“Another six? But we’ve looked at four already!”

“Well, we’ve only looked at ‘will’ future and ‘going to’ future so far. But, if you’re weary and feeling small, what about tomorrow?”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“*I’m seeing Susan in the pub tomorrow.*”

“I don’t believe you!”

“*It’s true! Look, here’s my **diary**. Thursday, seven o’clock: see Susan in the Bridge. Why have you got that smile on your face?*”

“Because you just used the next form.”

“*I did?*”

“You certainly did. When we talk about **arrangements** that we have made with a few other people, the kind of **arrangement** that you would write in your **diary**...”

“*Like seeing Susan in the pub?*”

“Exactly like that. Do you remember what you told me earlier? Why can’t you see me tomorrow?”

“*Because I’m seeing Susan in the pub tomorrow!*”

“Exactly!”

“*But wait a minute, that’s the **present continuous** form. Surely I shouldn’t’ve used that for a future form!*”

“Have a little more faith in your own English. We do use the **present continuous with future meaning** if we are talking about an **arrangement** that we have made. The kind of thing you would write in your **diary**.”

“*Okay, got that. Next please!*”

“You sound like someone selling tickets in train station!”

“*I used to work in a railway station you know.*”

“How convenient. I’m going to Bristol on Saturday. Can you tell me the time of the first train from London to Bristol please.”

“*No problem. That **timetable** is branded into my poor brain cells. The first train to Bristol leaves at quarter past six.*”

“On Saturday.”

“*Yes, on Saturday.*”

“You mean in three days’ time.”

“*Yes, in three days’ time. Are you a little slow? Bad at mathematics perhaps?*”

“No, no. I’m just checking. Making sure that you realise that you are talking about the future.”

“*Again? What did I say?*”

“You said, The first train to Bristol leaves at quarter past six.”

“*But that’s the present simple tense! We use that for things which happen on a regular*

basis.”

“Well, surely the 06.15 to Bristol leaves on a regular basis - every Saturday.”

“*Well, it would if the service wasn't so crap.*”

“The important thing is that the 06.15 train is on a **timetable**. On some kind of **fixed agenda**. In such cases we can use the **simple present tense** although we are talking about an event in the future.”

“*I've got you. But it isn't a very common form, is it?*”

“True, we are looking at the various forms in order of frequency. This one is number 6 out of 8 that we are going to look at today.”

“*So, just two more to go! I really want to finish this before I go away.*”

“Go away? Where are you going?”

“*To the Cairngorm mountains. Ah yes, tomorrow afternoon I'll be sitting on top of Ben Nevis, eating my cheese and pickle sandwiches...*”

“Perfect!”

“*Not really, I'd rather have a pot noodle but it's a real hassle...*”

“No, I mean your example.”

“*My example?*”

“Of the **future continuous!**”

“*All I said was 'eating my cheese and pickle sandwiches'.*”

“No, no, before that.”

“*I'll be sitting on top of Ben Nevis...*”

“Exactly! When you look to the future and tell someone about an action at a particular time in the future, you use the future continuous! Tell me, **what will you be doing** at three o'clock tomorrow morning?”

“*Sleeping, if I'm lucky, or perhaps not sleeping if I'm lucky!*”

“Forget the smut and give me a full answer!”

“*Sorry, oh great master. 'I'll be sleeping at three o'clock tomorrow morning'. Okay?*”

“So you started the action of sleeping some time before three o'clock?”

“*Probably.*”

“And continued it some time after three o'clock?”

“*Probably. Good grief, you sound like a bloody policeman!*”

“I'm just asking some concept questions. Making sure that you understand when to use the **future continuous**.”

“*Okay, that was number 7. Now to the final one! This one must be really exotic. Surely no one ever uses the eighth one.*”

“You'd be surprised. How many countries have you visited?”

“*Me? I'm a great traveller. I've visited 99 countries!*”

“Any travel plans this summer?”

“*Yeah, I'm off to North Vietnam.*”

‘How convenient. Been before, have you?’

“*Nope!*”

‘So at the moment you have visited 99 countries. But by September...’

“*I will have visited 100 countries!*”

‘Amazing!’

‘Am I?’

‘Not you, me! I elicited all 8 forms out of you.’

“*But where was number 8? I won’t have gained a full understanding of futurity until I hear the eighth one!*”

‘There it is again!’

“*There is what again?*”

‘The future perfect! You are looking ahead to a time in the future but then you are looking back from that time.’

“*That sounds wickedly complicated.*”

‘It’s not easy but you’d be surprised how often we use it.’

“*Mmm, can I produce a little table like last time?*”

‘Be my guest.’

FORM	USED	EXAMPLE
present continuous	when talking about arrangements (diary future)	<i>I’m seeing Susan in the Bridge tomorrow at five o’clock</i>
present simple	when talking about timetable events (timetable future)	<i>The first train to Bristol leaves at quarter past six.</i>
future continuous	when talking about an action at a time in the future	<i>Tomorrow afternoon I’ll be sitting on top of Ben Nevis...</i>
future perfect	when talking about an action from the perspective of a time in the future	<i>By September I will have visited 100 countries!</i>

“*Okay, that’s it. All 8 forms.*”

‘Well...’

“*Well what?*”

‘Well there are a few others and then there are many cases in which you could use quite a few different forms but I didn’t want to make it complicated for you.’

“*Not complicated!!! Come here. I’m going to give you a good slap.*”

“*Aha! ‘Going to’ future used because of... OW! OW! OW!*”