

Malcolm Mann
June 2016

Simple Future:

How do we REALLY talk about the future in English?

Will, be going to, present continuous, present simple, future perfect, future continuous, modals – even on occasion past tenses. There are a number of different ways to talk about the future in English.

In this session, we'll look at how future time has traditionally been presented in coursebooks and grammar books in terms of function, and explore how helpful that approach is for our students – and, indeed, how accurate.

We'll then look at the role formality, emphasis and sentence structure also play in determining how we can and should talk about future situations.

We arrive at 3 p.m. tomorrow.

We're arriving at 3 p.m. tomorrow.

We're going to arrive at 3 p.m. tomorrow.

We will arrive at 3 p.m. tomorrow.

use *be going to* for a prediction
based on present evidence

*It looks like the situation will deteriorate
further over the next hundred years or so.*

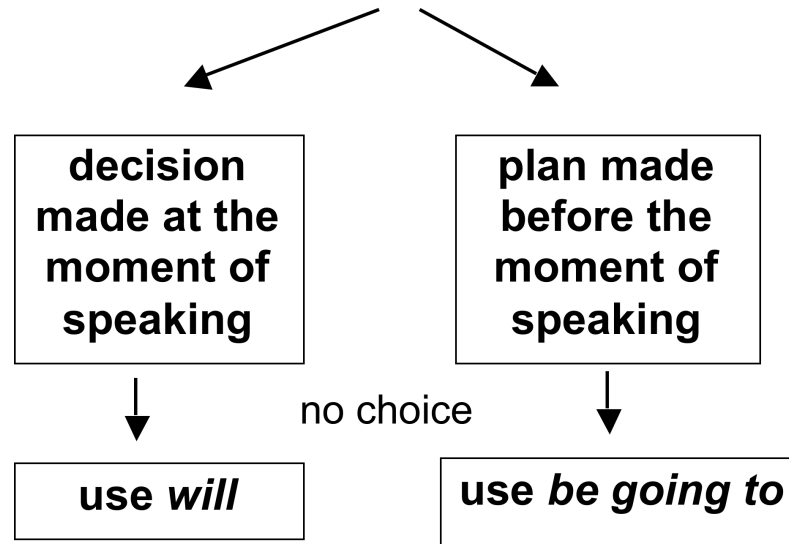
The Traditional Model

✓ contrastively exclusive:

X We CAN use *will*...

✓ We SHOULD use *will*...

determine the function



The Traditional Model

Use **will** for:

- **decisions made at the moment of speaking**
- **predictions not based on present evidence**
(often used with *I believe / hope / think*, etc)
- **future facts**

Use **be going to** for:

- **intentions and plans made before the moment of speaking**
- **predictions based on present evidence**

Are these correct?

- *I know! I'm **going to** get Dad a jumper for Christmas!*
(decision made at the moment of speaking)
- *I think that one day we're **going to** discover that the world is actually flat.*
(prediction not based on present evidence)
- *The election **is going to** be held next April.*
(future fact)
- *We'**ll** definitely visit the British Museum while we're in London.*
(plan made before the moment of speaking)
- *You'**ll** fall if you're not careful!*
(prediction based on present evidence)

Corpus-based Model

- ✓ not contrastively exclusive in terms of function
- ✓ The choice the student has to make once the function has been determined is, in fact, often a real choice.
- ✓ The difference between, say, *will* and *be going to* is often not a matter of function.
- ✓ Rather, it is a matter of formality or emphasis or, on occasion, sentence structure.
- ✓ Sometimes, whether one decides in the end to use *will* or *be going to* seems to make no real difference whatsoever to the meaning.

to express facts about the future

We can use:

✓ **will**

(formal) e.g. *The 2020 Olympics **will** be held in Tokyo.*

✓ **be going to**

(less formal than *will*) e.g. *They're **going to** hold the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.*

✓ **Present Continuous**

(for arrangements) e.g. *They **are holding** the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.*

✓ **Present Simple**

(if the fact concerns a fixed event which cannot be changed)

e.g. *The 2020 Olympics **are** in Tokyo.*

to express predictions based on no present evidence

We can use:

✓ **will**

(formal)

e.g. *One day, hamsters **will** take over the world.*

✓ **be going to**

(less formal than *will*)

e.g. *One day, hamsters **are going to** take over the world.*

X Present Continuous

X Present Simple

to express predictions based on present evidence

We can use:

✓ **will**

1 (if prediction expresses conditionality)

e.g. *If you're not careful, you'll fall!*

2 (formal)

e.g. *From the polls, it appears that the UK **will** vote to leave the EU.*

✓ **be going to**

(less formal than *will*)

e.g. *Look out! You're **going to** fall!*

X Present Continuous

(Note: *Look out! That building's falling down!* is describing a situation now rather than predicting the future)

X Present Simple

to express decisions made at the moment of speaking

We can use:

✓ **will**

(emphasises the decision)

e.g. *I know! I'll get Dad a CD for his birthday.*

✓ **be going to**

(emphasises the intention)

e.g. *I know! I'm going to get Dad a CD for his birthday.*

X Present Continuous

X Present Simple

to express plans, intentions and
arrangements decided on before the
moment of speaking

intention



**desire/wish to do
something
BUT it hasn't been
planned yet**

***When I grow up, I want to
be an astronaut.***

plan/arrangement



**The plan/arrangement
has already been made**

***I'm studying law because
I want to be a lawyer.***

to express plans, intentions and arrangements decided on before the moment of speaking

We can use:

✓ **will**

1 (emphasises prediction that the intention will be realised)

e.g. *We'll definitely visit the British Museum while we're in London.*

2 formal

e.g. *The referendum **will** be held on 23rd June.*

✓ **be going to**

e.g. *I'm **going to** be a writer when I'm older.*

✓ **Present Continuous**

(if an arrangement rather than just an intention)

e.g. *We're **coming** back on Thursday.*

✓ **Present Simple**

(if arrangement concerns a fixed event which cannot be changed)

e.g. *We **come** back on Thursday.*

to express plans, intentions and
arrangements decided on before the
moment of speaking

We cannot use Present Continuous for intentions:

X *~~I'm being~~ a writer when I'm older.*

We can use Present Continuous for arrangements:

We're coming back on Thursday.

**to express plans, intentions and
arrangements decided on before the
moment of speaking**

**You can use *be going to* for arrangements and
intentions:**

***I'm going to be** a writer when I'm older.*

***I'm going to go** shopping tomorrow.*

to express plans, intentions and
arrangements decided on before the
moment of speaking

**You can use *be going to* or Present Continuous for
arrangements:**

I'm going to go shopping tomorrow.

I'm going shopping tomorrow.

| | <i>be going to</i> | present continuous |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Intentions | ✓ | ✗ |
| Arrangements | ✓ | ✓ |

to express offers

We can use:

✓ **will**

e.g. *I'll help you!*

(note: for offers in the question form, we use *shall* with *I* and *we*: e.g. **Shall** I help you with the washing-up?)

✓ **be going to**

(emphasises that the decision was made before the moment of speaking)

e.g. *Don't worry! I'm going to help you.*

X Present Continuous

X Present Simple

to express promises

We can use:

✓ ***will***

(emphasises promise)

e.g. *I promise I'll be there.*

✓ ***be going to***

(emphasises intention)

e.g. *I promise I'm going to be there.*

X Present Continuous

X Present Simple

to express suggestions

We can use:

X will

Note: we can use **shall**

e.g. ***Shall** we get a pizza tonight?*

X be going to

X Present Continuous

✓ **Present Simple**

(negative question form)

e.g. ***Why don't we get** a pizza tonight?*

to express requests for action

We can use:

✓ **will**

e.g. **Will** you help me tomorrow?

✓ **be going to**

(disguised as request for information for purposes of politeness)

e.g. **Are you going to** help me tomorrow?

✓ **Present Continuous**

(disguised as request for information for purposes of politeness)

e.g. **Are you helping** me tomorrow?

X Present Simple

to express refusals

We can use:

✓ **will**

e.g. *No, I **won't** do your homework for you.*

✓ **be going to**

e.g. *No, I'm not **going to** do your homework for you.*

✓ **Present Continuous**

e.g. *No, I'm not **doing** your homework for you.*

X Present Simple

| | <i>will</i> | <i>be going to</i> | Present continuous | Present Simple |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| future fact (but not arrangement) | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| prediction – no evidence | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| prediction – with evidence | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| decision made at moment of speaking | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| intention | ✓ | ✓ | X | |
| arrangement | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| offer | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| promise | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| suggestion | | | | ✓ |
| request for action | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| refusal | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |

| | future fact (but not arranged) | prediction – no evidence | prediction – with evidence | decision at moment of speaking | intention | arrangement | offer | promise | suggestion | request for action | refusal |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------|---------|------------|--------------------|---------|
| <i>will</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>be going to</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present continuous | | | | | X | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present Simple | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |

Conclusion 1

The difference between *will* and *be going to* is rarely connected to function.

It's almost always because of register or emphasis.

| | future fact (but not arranged) | prediction – no evidence | prediction – with evidence | decision at moment of speaking | intention | arrangement | offer | promise | suggestion | request for action | refusal |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------|---------|------------|--------------------|---------|
| <i>will</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>be going to</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present continuous | | | | | X | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present Simple | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |

Conclusion 2

Present Simple has very specific functions which are relatively easy for students to understand.

| | future fact (but not arranged) | prediction – no evidence | prediction – with evidence | decision at moment of speaking | intention | arrangement | offer | promise | suggestion | request for action | refusal |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------|---------|------------|--------------------|---------|
| <i>will</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>be going to</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present continuous | | | | | X | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present Simple | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |

Conclusion 3

It's essential that students understand the difference between intentions and arrangements.

| | future fact (but not arranged) | prediction – no evidence | prediction – with evidence | decision at moment of speaking | intention | arrangement | offer | promise | suggestion | request for action | refusal |
|-----------------------|---|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|-----------|-------------|-------|---------|------------|-----------------------|---------|
| <i>will</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>be going to</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present continuous | | | | | X | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present Simple | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |

Conclusion 4

The most important thing about Present Continuous is that it is NOT used to describe intentions.

| | future fact (but not arranged) | prediction – no evidence | prediction – with evidence | decision at moment of speaking | intention | arrangement | offer | promise | suggestion | request for action | refusal |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------|---------|------------|--------------------|---------|
| <i>will</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>be going to</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present continuous | | | | | X | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present Simple | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |

Conclusion 5

We should differentiate between future facts and arrangements.

Future fact:

The sun will continue burning for at least 5 billion years.

The sun's going to continue burning for at least 5 billion years.

| | future fact (but not arranged) | prediction – no evidence | prediction – with evidence | decision at moment of speaking | intention | arrangement | offer | promise | suggestion | request for action | refusal |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------|---------|------------|--------------------|---------|
| <i>will</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>be going to</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present continuous | | | | | X | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present Simple | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |

Conclusion 5

We should differentiate between future facts and arrangements.

Arrangement:

They will land on Mars next April.

They're going to land on Mars next April.

They're landing on Mars next April.

They land on Mars next April.

| | future fact (but not arranged) | prediction – no evidence | prediction – with evidence | decision at moment of speaking | intention | arrangement | offer | promise | suggestion | request for action | refusal |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------|---------|------------|--------------------|---------|
| <i>will</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>be going to</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present continuous | | | | | X | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Present Simple | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |

Conclusion 6

Our students need to understand that sometimes they have a real choice that doesn't affect meaning:

- ✓ *We're going to the cinema tonight.*
- ✓ *We're going to go to the cinema tonight.*

How can we best teach 'expressing future time' in the classroom?

- ✓ stop saying it's always a straight choice in terms of function
- ✓ be very careful what we ask students to contrast

A Formal to informal / informal to formal

From newspaper article:

The 2020 Olympics will be held in Tokyo.

Q: Where are they going to hold the 2020 Olympics?

A: They're going to hold them in Tokyo.

B Contrastive – correct or incorrect? Tick or cross.

1

- a We're going to meet them at 8pm tomorrow night. ____
- b We're meeting them at 8pm tomorrow night. ____
- c We meet them at 8 pm tomorrow night. ____

2

- a Term starts on 10th January. ____
- b Term will start on 10th January. ____
- c Term's starting on 10th January. ____
- d Term's going to start on 10th January. ____

3 Productive Contrastive

_____ (we / meet) them tomorrow.

We're going to / We're meeting / We'll meet / We meet

Followed by discussion about who might say/write these.

C Is there a difference? yes / no

- 1
 - a) The election will be held next Spring.
 - b) The election's going to be held next Spring.

- 2
 - a) We're going on a school trip next week.
 - b) We're going to go on a school trip next week.

D Which is formal/written? Which is informal/spoken?

- 1
 - a) The election will be held next Spring.
 - b) The election's going to be held next Spring.

References

The Longman Grammar of
Spoken and Written English

Practical English Usage

Destination B1/B2/C1-C2

Malcolm Mann

