

The future form in everyday business communication

The future form in English is a funny thing because at some point you get told don't use 'will' for your plans. As a native speaker if you heard me talking about my plans and intentions with friends over a 'virtual' beer you would hear I use 'will' all the time.

While this is technically incorrect, it is acceptable in spoken English as there is no impact on meaning. In a 'quickfire' business meeting you do not want to be slowed down by thinking about which form of the future you should be using.

However, in written communications it is worth being more precise. It is here that you can invest the time to use the future form with accuracy. We use a range of structures for the future, these can be broadly divided into four groups and all are subtly different in their meaning.

Group 1: Possibilities/ideas about the future.

We use 'could'/'may'/'might' to talk about ideas that are 50/50, that are not certain. Don't forget when you use modal verbs you always follow with the infinitive form (without 'to').

Example: We could organise a virtual Christmas party, if people are up for it!

Example: I might attend the conference; I am not sure.

Group 2: Making a decision in the moment.

We use 'will' or 'won't' to talk about a decision taken in the moment. The real timeframe in using 'will' correctly is very narrow!

Example: Great idea! I will speak to Peter about next steps.

Example: I will speak to Sally about the conference.

Example: I won't attend the meeting, I have too much work.

Group 3: Plans.

3.1: We use 'going to' to talk about intentions and precise plans. You can use 'going to' when you have decided to do something but have not yet organised it (an intention). You can also use 'going to' to describe detailed plans with precise times.

Example: I have decided I am going to review our business plan.

Example: I am going to meet Peter tomorrow at 9.00 am.

3.2: We use any other form of the present continuous (outside of 'going to') to talk about precise plans where you reference a particular time in the future.

Example: We are visiting Berlin in December for Christmas.

Example: I am meeting Peter tomorrow at 9.00 am.

You can also use the future continuous - will + be + verb + 'ing' to do the same job.

Example: We will be meeting tomorrow to review the Q4 costings.

3.3: We use the present simple to talk about official plans, for example, train timetables, flight information, office, or factory schedules etc. Note the emphasis here is on information in the future that is external to you.

Example: The production team starts work at 7.00 pm.

Example: The flight departs at 7.30 am on 2 February 2021.

Example: The office opens at 7.00 am tomorrow.

Group 4: Predictions.

Note: We use slightly different grammar forms to talk about predictions rather than a plan. A prediction is often a feeling about your future, but you can also make predictions based on evidence as well.

4.1: We use 'will'/'won't' to talk about confident predictions about the future. These predictions are often instinctive - based on your 'gut' feeling.

Example: My business will have a better year in 2021!

Example: The world will be back to normal in 2025.

4.2: We use 'might'/'may'/'could' to talk about predictions where we are not certain, it is 50/50.

Example: I might go to Portugal this summer; it depends on work.

Example: England could win the World Cup - they will need a lot of luck.

4.3: We use 'going to' to make strong predictions based on evidence.

Example: The clouds are dark I think it is going to rain (The classic textbook example).

Example: Our profits were strong last quarter; On this basis I am sure profits are going to increase in Q4.

