

Future Forms

Yukiazb from Japan writes:

Dear Sir,

I'm a 63 year old man learning English in Japan. I'll be glad if you would let me know the differences in meaning of the following sentences:

- 1) I'll see you tomorrow
- 2) I'm going to see you tomorrow
- 3) I'm seeing you tomorrow
- 4) I'll be seeing you tomorrow

Thank you

Gareth Rees answers

Well, thank you very much for this question and indeed, talking about the future in English is not straightforward, partly because we don't have one specific future tense.

You have asked about four forms which are often confused – and they are often confused because they are, in fact, confusing! They are confusing because the differences between these forms are not fixed or absolute. Sometimes all four forms might be suitable for a situation. Today, I'll talk about each form individually.

Now, remember that the context for these sentences seems to be social or work plans for tomorrow. The first example:

'I'll see you tomorrow.' – This is 'will' + the infinitive. We use this form when we speak at the same time that we make a decision about the future plan. For example:

'When can you give me an answer?'

'Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Is that okay?'

Now, the second example:

'I'm going to see you tomorrow' – This is 'to be going to' + the infinitive. We use this form when we have made the decision and plan before we speak. We are telling someone what we have already decided or agreed to do.

Look at these two examples to compare the first two forms:

1. 'They say the weather will be nice tomorrow'

'Really? Oh well, in that case, I think I'll go to the beach'

2. 'They say the weather will be nice tomorrow'

'I know - I checked the news yesterday. I'm going to go to the beach. Would you like to come?'

So, you can see the difference between these two forms. In the first one, the decision is made at the time of speaking. In the second one, the decision was made earlier; the plan has been made.

Now, the third form:

'I'm seeing you tomorrow' – This is the present continuous with a future meaning. We use it to talk about definite plans and arrangements. Things have been decided already, and arrangements have been made. As you can see, this is very similar in use to 'to be going to'.

Importantly, we generally use the present continuous when we are thinking about a particular time in the future. And it is commonly used to talk about social plans and meetings. On a Friday at work, the most common question is probably:

'What are you doing this weekend?'

Finally, the last form:

"I'll be seeing you tomorrow." - This is 'will' + the continuous infinitive.

We use this form when we want to bring some of the meaning of the continuous form to our description of future events.

The continuous form emphasises that an activity is happening at a certain time, and this activity lasts for a limited period of time. This meaning is now combined with one meaning of 'will' - namely that 'will' can describe future facts or predictions.

So, if you want to describe a future event and you want to emphasise the activity that will take place over time of this event, you say:

'At this time tomorrow, I'll be swimming in the sea. No more work for me - I'm on holiday!'

I hope this helps you understand these four forms a little better. Remember that 'to be going to' and the present continuous both suggest that plans have been made already. 'Will' is used for spontaneous decisions and 'will be doing' emphasises the action at a particular time in the future.

Anyway, time to finish. I'm meeting my boss in an hour and I haven't read the report yet!

Gareth Rees has been an English language teacher and teacher trainer for over 10 years. He is currently a lecturer at London Metropolitan University and his first course book for English Language learners is due to be published in the near future.