

The future seen from the past

Introduction



I **was** only **going to** order a croissant but I changed my mind!

Definition

These structures are for talking about past events when we want to refer to something that was in the future at that time.

Construction

We use the past forms of the tenses we usually use to talk about the future. For example:

Jan 2016: It's **going to** be a difficult year for us so we'**ll** have to cut costs.

Dec 2016: We knew in January that it **was going to** be a difficult year for us and that we'**d** have to cut costs.

| Future tense | As seen from the past |
|--|--|
| future simple will | would |
| am/is/are going to | was/were going to |
| present continuous | past continuous |
| present simple | past simple |
| future continuous 'will' + 'be' + present participle | 'would' + 'be' + present participle |
| future perfect simple 'will have' + past participle | 'would have' + past participle |
| future perfect continuous 'will have been' + present participle | 'would have been' + present participle |

Uses

We use the past tense forms of verbs and expressions that we usually use for the future in order to talk about an event or activity that **was** in the future at a certain point in the past.

We don't always know if the activity happened or not:

He didn't give her the results on the phone because he had a lot to do and **was seeing** her later anyway. She was annoyed when she realised this but was happy with the results!

I **was going to** discuss it with her at the meeting the next day but she wasn't there.

Other expressions for talking about the future

As well as the standard future tenses, we can also use other expressions for the future in this way.

Expressions with 'be'

| Expression | Examples |
|--|---|
| 'be' + infinitive | We were surprised to hear that the company was to lay off 2,000 employees. She joined the company in 1984 but it was to be another 30 years before she became a senior manager.* He was to direct two more comedies before switching to science fiction films in the 1990s.* |
| 'be about' + infinitive | I was just about to go to lunch when an emergency meeting was called. |
| 'be due' + infinitive | He was due to retire in March but the company asked him to stay on for another six months. |
| 'be bound' + infinitive | He was bound to refuse - I don't know why you asked him! |
| 'be set' + infinitive | They were all set to go ahead with the barbecue but it rained after all. |
| be sure/certain/likely /unlikely etc. + infinitive | I knew he was unlikely to accept - it wasn't really the right job for him. |
| be on the verge/brink/point of + noun or gerund | Scientists at that time didn't realise they were on the brink of a major discovery. |

* **Note that** when 'be' + infinitive refers to the future from the past, it is often used to talk about what happened to someone whether they were in control of these events or not. See **Expressions for talking about the future** for more information.

Expressions with other verbs

| Verb | Examples |
|---|---|
| aim, expect, guarantee, hope, intend, mean, propose, want etc. + infinitive | They were hoping to get an earlier train but got held up in traffic. He intended to look into the matter as soon as he had time. |
| 'looking' + infinitive | They were looking to expand into North America before the financial crisis. |

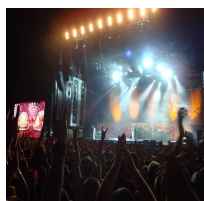
Examples



When I heard they **were going to** retire to the coast, I was really happy for them. I knew they **wouldn't** regret it.



We went out early because we **were meeting** friends for breakfast at their hotel. We wanted to see them before they **left** for the airport.



We knew the doors **opened** at 6.00 so we had to hurry to make sure we got a spot near the stage.



She was getting excited because it **was** her birthday the next day.



She couldn't have imagined that by the end of the year she'd **be working** for a big international company. Maybe later, she'd get a posting abroad.



They looked at their list and were pleased to see that by the end of the year, they **would have visited every country in Europe. When they **got** to the last one, they'd **do** something special to celebrate**