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The Futures

Controversy over *Shall*



Although not often addressed in grammar books, there's a certain degree of controversy over this modal auxiliary, and that probably won't end with this book.

Except in certain circumstances, *shall* is not the word of choice in American English for the pure or simple future; we let the modal auxiliary *will* do that job for us.

In formal language, *shall* can be used to make suggestions:

Shall we leave now?

Again in formal speech, *shall* can be used to introduce an offer:

Shall I do that for you?

Even when *shall* is used as a pure future form, it's restricted in its use with the pronouns *I* and *we*, and is rarely used with the combined phrase *you and I*.

It's interesting to note that *will* is the preferred modal auxiliary in every English-speaking country, and that *shall* is losing ground even in the British Isles.

Marginal Future Expressions



There are two more expressions that show futurity although their main focus isn't necessarily on time so much as it is on other ideas. Take a look at the following dialogue, which includes these two expressions.

- A: When is Mr. Aziz arriving in town?
 B: His flight **is due** in at noon, I believe.
 A: Fine. He's **to see** Mr. Craig as soon as he gets here.
 B: All right. I'll make a note of it.

Be Due (+ infinitive verb/adverbial phrase)

Can you think of other ways to express the phrase "His flight is due in . . ." as it appears in the dialogue? See if you can come up with at least two phrases that mean the same idea and write them below.

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Chances are you've come up with phrases such as these:

- His flight **is expected in** . . . / **is expected to arrive** . . .
- We anticipate that his flight **will get in** . . . / **arrive** . . .
- His flight **should be in** . . . / **should arrive** . . .

All of these synonymous phrases clearly show that their focus is on expectations about Mr. Aziz's flight; the secondary consideration is that we're dealing with a future event.

We can use *be due* with an infinitive verb ("He's due to arrive at any moment") or with an adverbial phrase ("He's due in town" / "He's due here by 3 o'clock").

So when do we tend to use this expression? Think about the situation I've presented in the dialogue and any other situations you can imagine when *be due* is appropriate. What would you say its main use is? Write your conclusion below.

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To sum up, we tend to use *be due* for events that are scheduled in the future. Actually, *be due* accomplishes the same thing that the simple present accomplishes in this use, but the subtle difference is that *be due* carries the extra nuance that tells us what we expect rather than just what is scheduled. Compare these two sentences:

They appear in court tomorrow at 3 p.m.
 (They're scheduled to appear in court tomorrow at 3 p.m.)
 They're due to appear in court tomorrow at 3 p.m.
 (We expect that they will appear in court tomorrow at 3 p.m.)

Be To (+ base verb)

Approach this expression the same way you looked at *be due*. Can you think of at least two ways to express the same idea as in the dialogue? Remember, the sentence is, "He's to see Mr. Craig as soon as he gets here." Write down your phrases below.

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Here are some possible synonymous phrases:

- He's supposed to see Mr. Craig . . .
- He should see Mr. Craig . . .
- He has to see Mr. Craig . . .

What would you say is the focus or the main intent of this expression? Just as you did for *be due*, think about the situation in the dialogue and come up with other situations in which *be to* would be appropriate. When you've formed a conclusion, write it down here.

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The overriding focus of this expression deals with **instructions, orders, arrangements, or planned events**. There's also something very formal sounding about this expression. And then, of course, there's also the idea of futurity.

If I expand the dialogue I've already presented to you, something interesting happens to the expression *be to*. Take a look at this example and figure out what's happened:

A: Be sure to make a note of it. Oh, and by the way, he **isn't to speak** to anyone until he's seen Mr. Craig. Have you got that?

B: Don't worry. I'll make sure he doesn't.

An interesting development, right? What other phrases would you think of that could substitute for "he isn't to speak to anyone"? Think of at least two and write them down below.

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Once again, here are some of the possibilities you could have chosen as synonymous phrases:

- Don't let him speak to anyone . . .
- He mustn't speak to anyone . . .
- He isn't allowed to speak to anyone . . .

Even though we can still make a case for the element of futurity in this expression, when it's used in the negative, it only represents an order, a prohibition. It's interesting how making this expression negative takes away its other possible uses.

But you're not quite finished with this little dialogue you've just been thinking about. There's something else going on that's unusual, grammatically speaking. Read the dialogue again and see if you can spot the unusual feature. Here's a hint: It occurs twice in the dialogue. When you think you've zeroed in on what I'm thinking of, write down the two examples of it.

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The two sentences that I'm thinking of are "Be sure you make a note of it" and "I'll make sure he doesn't." What's so unusual about the grammar in these two sentences is that by some quirk of the language, the verb in the dependent clause after the phrase *be sure* or *make sure* normally takes the simple present even though it represents a future action.

Marginal Future Expressions in a Nutshell

Be Due

 **scheduled future events with the nuance of expectation:**

The baby's due in the middle of October.

Be To

 **in the affirmative, used for future instructions, orders, arrangements, planned events:**

You're to fill out this application form and then set up an appointment for an interview.

 **in the negative, used for (future) prohibitions:**

You aren't to take this medicine on an empty stomach.

Be Sure . . . / Make Sure . . .

 **verb in the dependent clause following either of these expressions uses simple present to represent future:**

Be sure you leave before 7 p.m. tomorrow night.

Make sure the report is on my desk by Tuesday morning.