

THE MYTH OF FUTURE TENSE

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English has no future tense. It's just that simple. I keep finding reference to it, however, in grammar handbook after grammar handbook, in composition textbook after composition textbook. Here is a typical explanation:

For each kind of time—present, past, and future—verbs have a different tense form: simple, progressive, and perfect.

SIMPLE	REGULAR	IRREGULAR
<i>Present</i>	I walk	I go
<i>Past</i>	I walked	I went
<i>Future</i>	I shall (will) walk	I shall (will) go
PROGRESSIVE		
<i>Present</i>	I am walking	I am going
<i>Past</i>	I was walking	I was going
<i>Future</i>	I shall (will) be be walking	I shall (will) be walking
PERFECT		
<i>Present</i>	I have walked	I have gone
<i>Past</i>	I had walked	I had gone
<i>Future</i>	I shall (will) have walked	I shall (will) have gone

(Watkins 38-39)

This is a fairly complicated explanation of English tenses: present, past, and future multiplied by simple, progressive, and perfect to equal nine different tense signals for regular or irregular verbs. While this equation is geometrically or numerologically attractive, a simpler explanation is possible: English has two tenses—present tense and past tense. (In the progressive and perfect formations of the two tenses, English uses two auxiliaries—*be* and *have*: i.e., *be + verb + ing* is the progressive, and *have + verb + ed* (or its equivalent) is the perfect.)

To indicate futurity, English uses the modals¹ *will* or *shall* or *be going to*. This futurity is an expression of present or past intention, prediction, expectation, etc.: i.e., “I will jump” is an expression of a present intention of mine to jump; “Linda will jump” is an expression of a present prediction or expectation of Linda’s jumping; “I was going to jump” declares a past intention of mine to jump; “Linda was going to jump” declares a past prediction or expectation of Linda’s jumping. The words *will* and *would* (or *shall* or *be going to*) thus act in the same manner as other modals: *must* or *have to*, indicating necessity; *can* or *could*, indicating ability; *may* or *might*, indicating possibility; *should* and *ought to*, indicating obligation²:

I <i>will</i> jump.	I <i>will</i> be jumping.	I <i>will</i> have jumped.
I <i>would</i> jump.	I <i>would</i> be jumping.	I <i>would</i> have jumped.
I <i>must</i> jump.	I <i>must</i> be jumping.	I <i>must</i> have jumped.
I <i>have to</i> jump.	I <i>have to</i> be jumping.	I <i>have to</i> have jumped.
I <i>had to</i> jump.	I <i>had to</i> be jumping.	I <i>had to</i> have jumped.
I <i>can</i> jump.	I <i>can</i> be jumping.	I <i>can</i> have jumped.
I <i>could</i> jump.	I <i>could</i> be jumping.	I <i>could</i> have jumped.
I <i>may</i> jump.	I <i>may</i> be jumping.	I <i>may</i> have jumped.
I <i>might</i> jump.	I <i>might</i> be jumping.	I <i>might</i> have jumped.
I <i>should</i> jump.	I <i>should</i> be jumping.	I <i>should</i> have jumped.
I <i>ought to</i> jump.	I <i>ought to</i> be jumping.	I <i>ought to</i> have jumped.

Evidence that there are only two tenses in English—present and past—is discovered in the issue of tense switching. As a grammatical “error,” tense switching occurs only between past and present tense. Grammar handbooks and composition textbooks—even those that identify a future tense—illustrate the “error” of tense switching exclusively with examples of switches between present and past tense. If tense switching never occurs between the present tense and the “future tense” or between the past tense and the “future tense,” it is only because futurity is categorically different from either present or past tense. Thus, futurity has no claim to classification as a tense; it has no equivalence to present tense or to past tense.

This is no radically original idea either. Otto Jespersen questioned the occurrence of a future tense in English fifty years ago. Martin Joos rejected the notion of a future tense in English twenty years ago, as have Barbara Strang, A. McIntosh and F.R. Palmer. And this is the description of the English tenses which is given

in the authoritative and comprehensive *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, by Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik.³

In spite of the linguistic evidence, however, the myth of future tense survives. It survives because it is taught, and it is widely taught: according to my review of forty typical composition textbooks and grammar handbooks (see appendix), only five repudiate the myth of future tense.

This raises the obvious question: why? Why this clinging to the myth of future tense? Why this widespread rejection of a linguistically sound and pedagogically simpler explanation of English verb tenses?

The answer is that the myth of future tense is comforting. It is comforting because it is familiar: i.e., raised with the notion of there being three tenses in English, we hesitate to reject this tradition, even though it is grammatically more complicated and more problematic than its alternative.

But the myth of future tense is comforting not only because it is familiar, but because it gives the impression that we discuss the future with the same certitude with which we describe the past and the present. That is, if I perceive the assertion "I will jump" as a future equivalent of "I jump" or "I jumped," then I conceptualize my assertion as a *description* of the future, a description as unequivocal as a description of the past or present might be. If, however, I perceive the assertion "I will jump" as the intensive or predictive equivalent of "I must jump" or "I can jump," then I realize my assertion is as tentative and tenuous as a declaration of necessity or ability might be.

The myth of future tense thus gives us a future which is externalized and objectified, which has a reality equal to the reality of the present and the past, a reality as subject to human direction or domination as is the present and as was the past. To abandon the myth of future tense is to enter a genuinely different world, a world in which the future is discussed only in the uncertain and conditional terms with which we discuss our needs, obligations, abilities, and possibilities. This is a future which is internalized and thus subjective: it is a chaos of thoughts and feelings, the rational and irrational expectations of individual communicators.

Obviously, ours is a society impatient with timidity, a society which desires to direct its future with the same assurance and aggressiveness with which it directs (or believes it directs) the pre-

sent and with which it has (or believes it has) directed the past. We genuinely believe (or act as though we genuinely believe) that the assertion "I will . . ." describes a given occurrence that is simply still to occur. The idea that this assertion is only a description of the communicator's anticipation is subversive of the confidence which characterizes us as a people. If, for example, I tell you "I will arrive at eight o'clock" and if you perceive *will* as a signal of future tense and thus interpret my assertion as a description of the future, then (barring tacit contradictory information: e.g., familiarity with my habitual tardiness) you are likely to be quite confident of my arriving at eight o'clock. If, however, you perceive *will* as a modal of intention or prediction and thus interpret my assertion as meaning essentially "I intend to arrive at eight o'clock" or "I expect to arrive at eight o'clock," then (with or without tacit contradictory information) you are likely to be considerably less confident of my arriving at eight o'clock.

Thus we cling to the myth of future tense because it gives us the euphoria of determination and dominance. We cling, however, to a soporific habit which might easily cloud our vision and dull our perception of the future and leave us less equipped to engage the infinite possibilities or even the finite probabilities of the future. For example, if the President of the United States declares "I will never raise people's taxes" and if we perceive *will* as a signal of future tense and thus interpret the assertion as a description of the future, then (barring tacit contradictory information: e.g., familiarity with political promises) we are ill-prepared for the possibility of a future that does include higher taxes. If, however, we perceive *will* as a modal of intention or prediction and thus interpret the assertion as meaning essentially "I intend never to raise people's taxes" or "I expect never to raise people's taxes," then (with or without tacit contradictory information) we are advised of the possibility of a future with higher taxes and we can act either to prepare ourselves for this possibility or to prevent this possibility.

Thus to teach the myth of future tense is to sacrifice not only linguistic simplicity for complexity, but understanding for ignorance, and insight for illusion.

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NOTES

¹I am here maintaining a crucial distinction between auxiliaries and modals. The auxiliary is syntactically significant and semantically void: i.e., the words *be* and *have* fill a place within the verb phrase, though neither word has meaning. The modal is syntactically and semantically significant.

²My discussion here omits the emphatic *do/did*: e.g., "I do jump" or "I did jump." The emphatic functions neither entirely like an auxiliary nor entirely like a modal. Unlike an auxiliary, *do* can never be preceded by a modal: e.g., *"*I must do jump*" or *"*I ought to do jump*." Unlike a modal, *do* can never be followed by an auxiliary: *"*I do be jumping*" or *"*I do have jumped*." The emphatic *do/did*, occurring only as present tense or past tense (i.e., *"*I will do jump*"'), is additional evidence that English has no future tense.

³Otto Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles*, 7 vols., 1909-49 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), 4: 1-5; Martin Joos, *The English Verb* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp. 120-121; A. McIntosh, "Predictive Statements," *In Memory of J.R. Firth*, ed. C.E. Bazzell et al (London: Longman, 1966), p. 304; F.R. Palmer, *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb*, Miami Linguistic Series 2, (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1968), pp. 62-63; R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J. Svartvik, *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, (London: Longman, 1972) pp. 84-104; Barbara Strang, *Modern English Structure* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), pp. 167-168.

APPENDIX

I.

The following composition textbooks and grammar handbooks, reject the myth of future tense, identifying only a present tense and a past tense:

- Barnwell, William H. *Writing for a Reason*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983. See pp. 365-367.
- Bramer, George R., and Dorothy Sedley. *Writing for Readers*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing, 1981. See pp. 414-415.
- Broderick, John P. *The Able Writer*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982. See pp. 123-125.
- Ebbitt, Wilma R., and David R. Ebbitt. *Writer's Guide and Index to English*. 7th ed. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1982. See pp. 584-585.
- Kolln, Martha. *Language and Composition*. New York: Macmillan, 1984. See pp. 34-37: this is quite likely the clearest and simplest discussion of verb tenses that has been written.

II.

The following composition textbooks and grammar handbooks teach the myth of future tense:

- Baker, Sheridan. *The Complete Stylist and Handbook*. 3rd ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1984. See pp. 356-358.

- Bloom, Lynn Z. *Strategic Writing*. New York: Random House, 1983. See pp. 364-365.
- Corder, Jim W., and John J. Ruskiewicz. *Handbook of Current English*. 7th ed. Glenview, Illinois: Scot Foresman, 1985. See pp. 109-113.
- Clouse, Barbara Fine. *Writing: From Inner World to Outer World*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983. See p. 110.
- Crews, Frederick. *The Random House Handbook*. 4th ed. New York: Random House, 1984. See pp. 248-249.
- Gould, Eric. *Reading into Writing*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983. See pp. 641-643.
- Guth, Hans P. *New English Handbook*. 2nd ed. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1985. See p. 51.
- Hacker, Diana. *Rules for Writers*. New York: St. Martin's, 1985. See pp. 271-272.
- Hall, Donald. *Writing Well*. 5th ed. Boston: Little Brown, 1985. See p. 451.
- Hefferman, James A., and John E. Lincoln. *Writing: A College Handbook*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1982. See pp. 335-348.
- Hodges, John C., and Mary E. Whitten. *Harbrace College Handbook*. 9th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984. See pp. 78-81.
- Howard, C. Jeriel, and Richard Francis Tracz. *The Essential English Handbook and Rhetoric*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1985. See pp. 20-25.
- Kane, Thomas S. *The Oxford Guide to Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. See pp. 672-674.
- Kirkland, James W., and Collett B. Dilworth. *Concise English Handbook*. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1985. See pp. 63-64.
- Kirsznner, Laurie G., and Stephen R. Mandell. *Writing: A College Rhetoric*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984. See pp. 462-463.
- Leggett, Glenn et al. *Prentice-Hall Handbook for Writers*. 9th ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985. See pp. 43-45.
- Lindbloom, Peter. *The Elements of Writing*. New York: Macmillan, 1983. See pp. 220-226.
- McCrimmon, James M., Joseph F. Trimmer, and Nancy I. Sommers. *Writing with a Purpose*. 8th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984. See pp. 718-719.
- McMahan, Elizabeth, and Susan Day. *The Writer's Rhetoric and Handbook*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984. See pp. 448-449.
- Memering, Dean, and Frank O'Hare. *The Writer's Work*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984. See p. 433.
- Muller, Gilbert H. *The American College Handbook of Contemporary English*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. See pp. 253-257.
- Schor, Sandra, and Judith Fishman. *Random House Guide to Writing*. 2nd ed. New York: Random House, 1981. See pp. 272-277.
- Skurnick, Blanche. *The Heath Basic Writer*. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1983. See pp. 168-177.
- Stanley, Linda C. et al. *Ways to Writing*. New York: Macmillan, 1985. See p. 363.
- Sullivan, Walter, and George Core. *Writing from the Inside*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1983. See pp. 185-186.
- Watkins, Floyd C., and William B. Dillingham. *Practical English Handbook*. 6th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982. See pp. 38-41.

- Wiener, Harvey S., and Charles Bazerman. *Writing Skills Handbook*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983. See pp. 18-25.
- Wilson, Robert F., Jr. et al. *The Macmillan Handbook of English*. 7th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1982. See pp. 348-352.
- Winkler, Anthony C., and Jo Ray McCuen. *Rhetoric Made Plain*. 4th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984. See pp. 343-345.

III.

The following composition textbooks omit/obscure discussion of verb tenses:

- Adelstein, Michael E., and Jean G. Pival. *The Writing Commitment*. 3rd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.
- Blum, Jack et al. *A Guide to the Whole Writing Process*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984. See p. 175: "The two most common verb tenses are present tense and past tense."
- Bridges, Charles W., and Ronald F. Lunsford. *Writing: Discovering Form and Meaning*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1984.
- Hairston, Maxine. *A Contemporary Rhetoric*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982.
- Hartwell, Patrick, and Robert H. Bentley. *Open to Language*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Neman, Beth S. *Writing Effectively*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1983.

