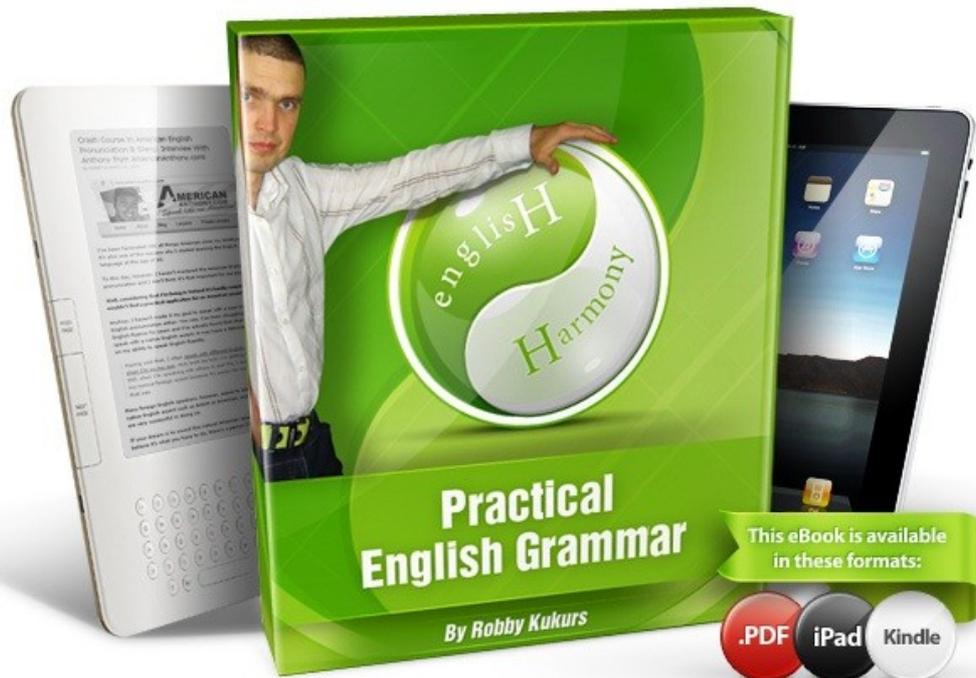


# *English Harmony*

# **Practical English Grammar**



By Robby Kukurs

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## ***Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced English Grammar? Nonsense!***

Much of that stress you experience when learning and improving your English could be alleviated if there were no different English grammar complexity levels, isn't that right?

Just think about it. The moment a foreigner decides to learn or improve English, his **success hugely depends on his attitude towards the process**. Depending on the perceived difficulty he can either achieve that long-desired English fluency or become completely unmotivated to improve if the end goal of being a fluent English speaker seems like an epic task.

I believe that ANY process – be it English learning, or learning high level chemistry isn't difficult as far as you fully understand what's being discussed in the particular lesson or book's chapter OR you can replicate the results without focusing too much on the details.

**Even rocket science is easy once you know what you're doing!**

I believe the same goes with English grammar. Well, first of all, I don't think English students should focus on grammar as much as the industry requires them to do in the first place. Grammar is nothing more than bunch of rules determining how words are arranged in a sentence and you can learn it all just by speaking mimicking native English speakers because **spoken English already has all NATURAL grammar in it!**

But if you do incorporate certain amount of English grammar studies in [your English improving routine](#), you may become overwhelmed by its complexity. All the grammar terms ranging from very easy ones such as a verb and a noun and ending with advanced high-end grammar stuff like conditional sentences and compound sentences will make you feel that there's so much to acquire and that you need to spend long, long years learning all that stuff.

And you're right. If you want to become an English teacher and know all ABOUT English grammar, it will be a lengthy task indeed.

If, on the other hand, you want to become a fluent English speaker, your perception suddenly changes. You don't need to divide English grammar into beginners, intermediate and advanced because it will only inhibit your progress.

**Do you want a proof that there's no easy and difficult English grammar?** All right, no problems!

Look at the following two sentences:

*“Johnie caught a ball”*

and

*“Our planet's biological diversity insures a very fine equilibrium which is endangered due to ever increasing human economical activities; also geopolitical developments over the last*

*few decades have put additional strain on our planet's capacity to maintain the fine balance between man and nature".*

The first sentence is clearly a beginners level English, but the second one is definitely too difficult to construct unless you've studied advanced level English grammar, right?

Wrong.

And here's why.

Our PERCEIVED complexity of the second sentence can be mostly attributed to its length and vocabulary.

**Just because it sounds complicated and harder to understand, doesn't necessarily imply more complex grammar!**

Just have a look at what I'm going to do now. I'm going to split the complex-compound sentence into separate clauses.

*"Our planet's biological diversity insures a very fine equilibrium."*

*"Equilibrium is endangered due to ever increasing human economical activities."*

*"Also geopolitical developments over the last few decades put additional strain on our planet's capacity."*

*"Capacity to maintain the fine balance between man and nature."*

Looks much better, doesn't it? You see, all of a sudden the advanced English grammar level became intermediate just because we split the long complex-compound sentence into the respective clauses. The resulting shorter sentences are much easier to read and understand, but does splitting the long sentence into a number of short ones mean reduction of the grammar complexity?

I don't think so! **Grammar behind the scenes remains the same.** It's just our PERCEPTION that changes! Just because the shorter sentences are easier to read doesn't mean that some more advanced grammar rules have been replaced by intermediate grammar.

The same grammar rule that binds words together in a sentence "*Johnie caught a ball*" is present in a longer sentence "*Our planet's biological diversity insures a very fine equilibrium.*"

"*Johnie caught*" and "*diversity insures*" are two pairs of a noun and a verb. In a sentence they work as a subject and a predicate and other words are simply added onto those two to convey a COMPLETE message.

And here comes the most important part of this chapter...

**Those who talk about beginners, intermediate and advanced levels of English grammar, are**

**ANALYZING SYNTAX of the sentence.** They're dissecting the elements of sentence structure and deciding whether this or that particular word combination is, for instance, a prepositional object or a compliment of a preposition.

If you say that the word "*endangered*" in the sentence "*Equilibrium is endangered due to ever increasing human economical activities*" is a predicative complement, they'll point out that it's actually a subject compliment. They'll make your head explode trying to grasp all the terms and concepts. And they'll be absolutely correct in saying that it's a very advanced grammar indeed!

**I rather prefer looking at English grammar from practical point of view.**

**All I need to know to communicate successfully in English is HOW words naturally arrange themselves in a sentence!**

I don't need to know WHY they're arranged in a particular way. As to the grammar terms – it's an even smaller concern to me and I'll leave it to academics and hard-core English grammar fanatics.

So as you can see, **if we leave the very ANALYSIS out, there's nothing advanced about adding a few more words to a sentence.** It doesn't make practical English grammar more or less advanced; I'd rather contribute the perceived complexity to the following two things – vocabulary and collocations. A new English vocabulary word or collocation isn't more or less difficult than another that you already knew. It's our perception that brands new things difficult!

I don't deny, you have to be able to use stuff like English grammar tenses correctly, but then again – you should rather look at them in the context of natural speech patterns rather than analyzing and deciding – all right, this is advanced stuff, I'm not ready for it yet!

If you look at the following English grammar construct – "*I would have been surprised if I didn't know what you were like*" – and try to analyze it, then yes, it's quite advanced because you'd have to learn new terms such as English Conditional Sentences, and then you'd have to learn how and when to use them and so on.

If you look at the same sentence as two joined phrases – "*I would have been surprised*" and "*I didn't know what you were like*" – and just learn them, all of a sudden the very concept of more and less advanced loses its relevance.

**There's nothing advanced about learning a new English phrase, learning its meaning, and learning to use it!**

## **English Possessive Case And All The Tricky Stuff!**

So, now let's look at the possessive case in English language. Sounds smart, doesn't it? Well, if you're not sure what possessive case is, here's a simple example:

*"The bottom of the website."*

You can also say – *"website's bottom."*

Same thing – on both occasions we describe the relationship of the bottom with the website. If you're not sure which form you should use – the *"of"* form or the apostrophe, stick with the following.

Generally when we describe possession in English language, we should **use the apostrophe when mentioning people**, and the **"of" form – when talking about things**. So for instance, if you're gossiping about the sister of your work colleague you'll say – *"Sarah's sister."*

You can also say – *"my workmate's sister."* But if you use apostrophe to describe association with a thing – for example – *"last night my house's windows were smashed"* – it just doesn't sound right. Better use the word *"of"* instead – *"last night the windows of my house were smashed."*

But this whole possessive case thing is quite tricky– and you'll really make your life much easier if you take the following into account.

**If you are the perfectionist type of person – like I was a few years ago – you may find yourself using the possessive case unnecessarily.** I remember there was a time when I was using the possessive case excessively and was saying things like – *"the keyboard of the computer"* or *"computer's keyboard"*, or even weird stuff like *"animals' world"* or *"the world of animals."*

In other words, **I was using the grammatically correct possessive case whenever it would be required in my own language** – and the same probably goes with you.

You see, my native language – Latvian – is a whole lot more complicated than English and the possessive case is actually always used when a possession or association between two things is described.

However, it's much different in English – and now I'll tell you something that I've repeated many times – stop translating directly from your native language! In English the possessive case is quite often omitted – **you just stick the two nouns together without any indication that there's a connection between them** – it will be rather implied than indicated grammatically.

*"Computer keyboard."*

*"Animal world."*

*"Accountancy software."*

*“Office whiteboard.”*

You see – there’s no need whatsoever to overcomplicate the matter and start using the possessive case on those occasions. *“Office’s whiteboard”* or *“the whiteboard of the office”*? Well, you may be given a green light for that in an English class – but I’m telling you – don’t do that! Don’t apply your language grammar rules on English!

By the way – did you notice what I just said – *“your language grammar rules”*. I didn’t use the possessive case – *“your language’s grammar rules”* or *“the grammar rules of your language”*. It wouldn’t be that wrong, but why on Earth would you need to add extra words and make your English speech more complicated?

Bear this in mind – **beauty of the English language is in its simplicity!** Of course, don’t go overboard and don’t eliminate the possessive case completely! If I said – *“the English language beauty”* – it just doesn’t sound right, does it? Well, of course it doesn’t, beauty of the English language is the right thing to say.

**But if you’re unsure** of a particular noun combination and you’re thinking – *“do I have to go with the possessive case or not?”* - **just use Google**. Yeap, it’s one of the simplest ways of checking things – just write *“language’s grammar rules”* into Google search bar, hit the search button, and Google will ask you – *“Did you mean “language grammar rules”?”* It’s very handy and you can do it every time when in doubt.

So if you write or speak English and you feel that you’re getting a bit carried away by using the possessive case – remember what you just read in this chapter!

Oh yes, one last thing – all that I previously said doesn’t apply when talking about people – only things. You’ll never say – *“George brother”*, or *“niece birthday.”* It’s always – *“George’s brother”* and *“niece’s birthday.”*

Last example - *“I have a nice wrist watch, don’t I?”* If I were to translate directly from my language when speaking English it would be – *“wrist’s watch.”* So remember – there are no such things as *“car’s batteries”*, *“hands’ cream”* or *“vacuum cleaners’ bags”*. Just get rid of the native language in your head if you catch yourself using similar word combinations and get used to the simple English way – *“car battery.”* *“Hand cream”*. *“Vacuum cleaner bag”*.

## **Using Past Participles As Adjectives vs Passive Voice**

I'm pretty sure you know what English Passive Voice is all about, and how it's constructed. After all, once you downloaded this eBook from [my blog](#), most likely you fall under the category of advanced English speakers, and you already know that Passive Voice is formed by using the verb 'to be' followed by Past Participle of the main verb – "*A huge amount of money was stolen from our shop today*". Passive voice is used when the object is unknown or it's irrelevant to know who's behind the action; all emphasis is put on the action itself – "money was stolen".

The very same English Tenses are used in the Passive Voice as in the Active Voice – Simple Tenses and Perfect Tenses – and the usage of both Passive and Active Voices is governed by the same rules. So, "*Someone seals up the box*" and "*The box is sealed up*" (general statements) are equivalent expressions in the same way as "*Someone has sealed up the box*" and "*The box has been sealed up*" (describing a finished action) are.

I noticed a long time ago, however, that in **conversational English it's not as straightforward as it may seem if you just look at the Passive and Active Tenses comparison table**.

I would hear quite often that the Simple Present form in the Passive Voice – "*The letter is written*" – is used instead of the Present Perfect one – "*The letter has been written*" - despite the fact that the proper way of expressing the completeness of the process would be by using the Present Perfect Tense...

This phenomenon was bothering me for a long time because I used to translate from my native language when speaking English and on many occasions I just couldn't decide which of the two options I should go for!

**In reality I would almost never hear native English speakers use Perfect Tenses to describe finished actions in Passive Voice**, and phrases like "*it has been done*" and "*it's been sorted*" would become "*it's done*" and "*it's sorted*". I would have thought that they should at least use Simple Past – "*it was done*" and "*it was sorted*" when referring to completed tasks because to me "*it is done*" would rather refer to an ongoing action like the Present Continuous Tense – "*it's being done*".

Eventually I was driven mad by trying to figure out the differences between the two Passive Voice Tenses – Simple Present and Present Perfect!

Let's take the following Simple Present Passive Voice example – "*The customers are contacted during working hours because our service desk operates from 9AM to 5PM.*" It's a general statement about the fact that customers are normally contacted during a certain time-frame, and it can be paraphrased using the Active Voice in the following way: "*We contact our customers during working hours...*"

So far, so good.

Now look at the following sentence – "*All customers who have fallen into arrears are contacted,*

*what should I do next?*” It’s obvious that **the action of contacting the customers is complete, so it kind of calls for a Perfect Tense** – “*customers have been contacted*”, **right? Yet this is exactly the type of spoken English everyone around me kept using**, and I just couldn’t get my head around it ... until I found out about Past Participle being used as an adjective

“*Customers are contacted*”, it appears, isn’t really a Passive Voice grammar construct.

**The word ‘contacted’ in this case is an adjective, and it simply describes the subject – ‘customers’!**

Very simple, yet I kept racking my brains for a long time trying to figure out why Simple Present in Passive Voice (which in fact wasn’t Passive Voice at all!) is used instead of Perfect Present.

I just hadn’t made the simple connection between other obvious adjectives – such as ‘*bored*’ or ‘*excited*’ – and the ones that looked like typical Past Participles, so I always assumed that they must be part of a Passive Voice grammar construct!

So for instance, if you say “*He is bored*”, it’s the same Active Voice construct as “*He is contacted*” and there’s no need to overcomplicate the matters and see the Passive Voice where it’s not. Sure, you CAN say “*He has been contacted*” and it would convey a very similar message. However, both Perfect Tense in the Passive Voice and Past Participle Adjective describe a complete action, so in reality it’s not about native English speakers substituting Perfect Tenses in the Passive Voice with Simple Present.

It’s just that **nearly every complete action can be described using an adjective** which is formed by adding an ending ‘-ed’ to a verb, and it’s identical to how a Past Participle of regular English verbs is formed!

I would say that native English speakers use Past Participles as adjectives instead of Passive Voice simply for the sake of convenience and simplicity; it’s just easier to say “*the package is wrapped*” than “*the package has been wrapped*”.

But should we really care about what grammar construct is used? Does it make any difference as far as we can explain ourselves properly in English? I think you know my answer!

I warmly suggest you **stop analyzing grammar aspects of the English language when you speak**, and you’ll find it much easier to communicate with others, and your English fluency will come along big time.

Personally I speak following my gut feeling, and I can’t always explain why I say one or another thing a certain way. The funny thing is, the more I try to put my finger on it, the bigger the chance of me starting to hesitate and become unable to express myself properly.

Now another example of how you can use Past Participle as an Adjective.

The proper way of saying that all players have received their cards in a game of poker is “*the cards have been dealt*”. It’s a typical phrase used among card players and gamblers all around the world,

and in this case there shouldn't be any doubt on which grammar construct to use.

However, if I hadn't heard that phrase before, I could actually say the same thing using a much simpler phrase – "*the cards are dealt*". As I previously said, there is a slight difference between those two phrases. You're most likely to come across the latter one – "*the cards are dealt*" – in general card game rule descriptions, but the former one – "*the cards have been dealt*" – is used when talking about a specific game. Having said "*The cards are dealt, let's begin the game!*", however, I wouldn't have made a fool out of myself because it doesn't sound that wrong!

Any English speaker will understand what I meant, and even if I use the Past Participle '*dealt*' in a phrase that is most commonly said in the Passive voice, it's still understandable!

So if you've been having similar doubts when using the Passive Voice and you feel overwhelmed whenever you try to implement those Perfect Tenses in the Passive Voice, you can rest assured that **there's nothing wrong with speaking in slightly simplified English and using Past Participles as adjectives**. Of course, I don't deny that it's necessary to be familiar with all aspects of the English Passive Voice because it's an essential part of the English language around us.

When writing, you'll probably put more thought into choosing which Grammar Tense to use, so when e-mailing an update of the current order status to your manager you'll probably write "*The order in question has been packed and we're waiting on further instructions in relation to delivery date*".

When having a real-life conversation, however, you're perfectly fine to say – "*The order in question is packed...*" – and, as stated previously, that's the way all native English speakers are speaking in everyday situations!

## ***Embedded Questions - When Reversing Word Order Isn't Necessary***

Now let's look at a very simple yet often ignored English grammar feature which affects the word order in interrogative sentences, otherwise known as questions – and it's called embedded questions.

**As we all know, in a question the word order changes**, and regardless of what word the sentence begins with – whether it's an auxiliary verb such as *'to do'* or one of those *'wh'* words like *'why'*, *'where'*, *'when'*, or *'who'* followed by an auxiliary verb – the word order in a question is the following – **auxiliary verb followed by the subject and then followed by the main verb in infinitive** and then followed by other words.

So a statement *"You broke the law by trying to help me"* becomes *"Did you break the law by trying to help me?"* when words are re-arranged in a question form. Of course, it's all common sense, and you've probably started wondering why I'm writing about something so simple in this practical English grammar chapter.

Well, don't be so rash, my friends, for here comes the tricky part!

As you may have noticed, **one mistake made by many foreign English speakers – probably including you – is that when you ask a question, you forget to change the main verb to its infinitive form.** It can happen quite easily, especially if your native language doesn't follow such a pattern in interrogative sentences. Even if you don't translate directly from your mother's tongue when speaking English, it still may happen every now and then that you say things like *"Where did she went?"* or *"Why did you forgot to do it?"* while you should have said *"Where did she go?"* and *"Why did you forget to do it?"* instead.

Most likely it's quite a rare occurrence, but still it's very annoying when it happens. And you know what? It happens to me as well, no matter how strange it sounds! Not that I'm some kind of an English professor – I'm just an ordinary foreigner and I don't claim to be someone special when it comes to speaking English, and I know that [making mistakes](#) is an integral part of any improvement process.

So What The Embedded Questions Are All About?

Basically what it means is that **if you begin the question with some other phrase** such as *"Can you tell me where...?"* or *"Do you know when...?"* or *"I wonder why..."* **and then follow it with the main question, you don't have to reverse the word order and you don't have to use the auxiliary verb either!**

So *"What time is it?"* becomes *"Can you tell me what time it is?"* and *"Why did you go home early yesterday?"* becomes *"Can you tell me why you went home early yesterday?"*

I think it's a really cool English language feature allowing foreign English speakers to use the Past Tense verb form in questions if that's what you're more comfortable with and you constantly keep forgetting that if you begin a standard interrogative question with an auxiliary verb in Past Tense,

the main verb changes to its infinitive form.

This feature is relevant to spoken English in particular, because it's quite normal to begin any question in a conversation with some other words, not just using the formal way of asking questions and using the auxiliary verb or a 'wh' word.

And if you come to think of it, it would be actually weird if you only ever used the standard question syntax in real life English conversations.

**You don't normally ask a straightforward question without indicating why you're asking it**, or without saying some sort of a polite phrase before the question. For instance, you wouldn't ask your work colleague just out of the blue – *“What time did we go home yesterday?”* You would most likely begin the question with something like *“Sorry Mark, can you tell me please...”* and then follow it up with the question. The whole sentence would therefore sound *“Sorry Mark, can you tell me please what time we went home yesterday?”*, so you don't have to use the auxiliary verb 'to do' when forming such questions.

As I previously said, this embedded question structure is very handy when questions about the past are asked, and you can leave the main verb in its past form in the question. But regardless of what tense is used, the same standard word order in embedded questions is followed, so you can **make it your habit to begin casual questions with a phrase such as** *“I wonder ...”, “Can you tell me ...?”, “Does anyone know...?”, “I just wanted to ask you ...”, “I don't know...”* and then omit the auxiliary verb that you'd normally begin the question with and use a normal word order in the sentence.

And now I'm going to give you a couple more examples.

*“Does anyone know what time the train leaves?”* instead of *“Does anyone know what time does the train leave?”*

*“I wonder what time you arrived home last night”* instead of *“I wonder what time did you arrive home last night?”*

*“I really don't know why it happened”* instead of *“I really don't know why did it happen”*.

*“Can you tell me why Sharon is so angry today?”* instead of *“Can you tell me why is Sharon so angry today?”*

*“I just wanted to ask you what time we're taking a break today”* instead of *“I just wanted to ask you what time are we taking a break today”*.

As you noticed, the last two examples weren't about omitting an auxiliary verb, because in sentence such as *“Why is Sharon so angry?”* there's none; in this case it's all about the word order which changes to normal when a question becomes embedded in a longer sentence.

So this is what I wanted to emphasize in this practical English grammar chapter – **in real English conversations questions are normally embedded**, which means they're preceded by another

phrase or sentence, and in this case you don't have to change the word order like if the question was on its own!

The reason why you'd be inclined towards using the reverse word order in an embedded question is because you've been taught that questions beginning with 'wh' words such as 'why', 'where', 'when' and similar would have a reverse word order, and it automatically triggers the standard question syntax.

So this is a piece of advice that might just help you speak a bit more confidently, my dear fellow foreign English speakers!

## **Can Present Continuous Substitute Present Simple Tense?**

**You can use Present Continuous to describe past events, talk about future arrangements and of course, use it to describe actions going on at this very moment.** The latter one is the typical use of Present Continuous and there was a time I thought it's the only one. However, you should never assume that something is set in stone when it comes to English grammar, and especially – the Present Continuous Tense!

It appears that it can also replace Present Simple on certain occasions, were you aware of that? Well, it might come as a surprise, but nonetheless it's true and if you hear someone say "*She's always doing three things at once*" or "*I'm constantly arguing with her, I just can't stand her!*" it doesn't mean it's bad English grammar.

You see, following the formal English Grammar rules, you'd use Present Simple with reoccurring activities, because that's what it says when you open any English Grammar book.

**Present Simple Tense is to be used with known facts, routines, habits and permanent things.** Personally I have a good visual memory (although sometimes it can be a bad thing) and I still remember a sample sentence in one of my first English Grammar books explaining Present Simple – "*Sun rises in the east*". It's a known truth, a permanent, regular activity, so we use Present Simple and the same goes with other things that are of a permanent nature.

Where we live, what we usually do, our daily routines – it's all the Present Simple Tense. "*I live in a three bedroom house. On most days I get up at 6:00 AM and have oat porridge for breakfast. I drive to work because it's not accessible by public transport.*"

**The Present Continuous Tense, on the other hand, describes actions that are happening right now,** not general things. So for example, "*I drive to work every day*" is a general statement about something I do on a regular basis, whereas "*I'm driving to work*" would imply that I'm sitting in the car right at this very moment and driving to work. Normally I would also add "*at the moment*" or a similar time indicator if I'm on phone, for instance. I would say "*I can't really talk now; I'm driving to work at the moment*".

This is the way English Grammar books explain differences between the two tenses, and by and large it's correct.

**In real life spoken English, however, things can't be always strictly separated.** I know that's what English students want – to get rid of any ambiguity so that it would be easier to pass English tests. Every English Grammar Tense should serve only its own purpose and by learning the respective rules of usage we can construct nice and correct English sentences. Sounds like every English student's dream, doesn't it?

Well, after you've spent some time with native English speakers in [natural English speaking environment](#), you'll realize that English tenses are sometimes used in a way you don't expect!

*“I’m always driving to work along the highway, but occasionally I take back roads for a change.”*

Please note that I used Present Continuous where Present Simple would be normally used, and if we stick to formal English Grammar rules to the letter, you may want to re-write the above sentence and make it into *“I always drive to work along the highway.”*

It’s a typical routine activity; it’s something that I always do – as indicated by the very word *“always”* – so it requires Present Simple, right?

Well, of course I could use Present Simple, and it wouldn’t sound wrong at all! I’m not trying to re-write English Grammar rules here and **I don’t suggest you start using Present Continuous on all occasions** when the Present Simple Tense would normally be used.

Present Simple for routine, temporary things, Present Continuous for ongoing actions – that’s the rule of thumb and you’ll be just fine by sticking to it.

However, this rule alone doesn’t explain why we can actually hear Present Continuous Tense used in sentences like:

*“My girlfriend’s always fighting with me, I’m sick of it!”*

*“He’s being grumpy all the time; I’ve never seen him smile!”*

*“I’m eating too much junk food; I’d better start cooking at home instead.”*

Just look at those examples above and think about this – aren’t all those actions involved happening regularly? Always fighting, being grumpy all the time, eating too much junk food – aren’t all those ROUTINE ACTIVITIES as opposed to ONGOING actions that require Present Continuous Tense to be used?

Well... They are, aren’t they?

Then why didn’t I use Present Simple instead? -

*“My girlfriend always fights with me, I’m sick of it!”*

*“He’s grumpy all the time; I’ve never seen him smile!”*

*“I eat too much junk food; I’d better start cooking at home instead.”*

And why can you hear such and similar sentences all the time in a natural English speaking environment? Is formal English Grammar really limited to classrooms and highly formal language only?

Until recently I didn’t have an answer to this. I thought that it’s just another distinction between conversational and formal English. And every time I would speak overusing Present Continuous I

would just follow my “gut feeling”, **I would just feel that it sounds right and wouldn’t question it.**

Well, I’m not saying you should start questioning every bit of English you speak – [over-analyzing](#) can lead to serious English fluency issues.

All I’m saying is that until recently it wasn’t really clear to me why **Present Continuous is used in conversational English so extensively as to even substitute Present Simple** on some occasions.

Well, it’s clear to me now and I can also give you an exact explanation as to why the Present Continuous Tense is used in sentences like *“I’m constantly worrying too much about my work, I shouldn’t mix my family life with my professional life.”*

You see, the thing is that **we can use Present Continuous when we talk about reoccurring actions that take place within a longer period of time, not necessarily right at this moment,** and the keywords that indicate such actions are ALWAYS, CONSTANTLY, ALL THE TIME, EVERYDAY, EVERY TIME I SEE YOU/HER/HIM, and similar time indicating expressions which describe the particular action’s continuity in a longer period of time.

I know it may sound quite confusing if you’re reading this for the first time, so here’s a full and thorough description of the concept of using Present Continuous in spoken English when describing repeating actions – something that Present Simple is supposed to do.

OK, so here’s the example.

Imagine that one morning you arrive at work wearing glasses and you’ve never worn ones before. Quite naturally it’s a surprise for your co-workers so you hear some of them exclaim: *“Look, he’s wearing glasses!”* Of course, it’s quite understandable that the Present Continuous Tense is used because your co-worker is stating an ongoing activity; something that he sees happening right now at this moment.

If, on the other hand, a general fact is stated that has no specific place on the time-line, Present Simple is used, which of course, is also common sense – *“I wear glasses because my eyesight has started to deteriorate.”* In this case you don’t refer to a particular moment of wearing the glasses, you’re referring to a general fact of wearing glasses and it can also be described as a routine action that you do on a regular basis.

So far so good, right?

But now comes the tricky part! Please read the following sentence – *“Why are you always wearing sunglasses?”* Imagine that you talk to someone who wears sunglasses all year round and you want to ask that person why he or she does it. If you followed the formal English Grammar rules, you’d use Present Simple and the question would sound *“Why do you always wear sunglasses?”* And please bear in mind – this question is totally correct and I’m not saying you should purposefully change the way you speak!

The purpose of this chapter is to show you that on occasions when you **talk about routine**

**activities EMPHASISING the ongoing action – you can use Present Continuous instead of Present Simple.** When you're looking at the person in question and you see for the hundredth time that he/she has the shades on, your question is actually formed from two parts.

The first part originates from this moment, from the ongoing action. You see your co-worker, you see the shades, and it's something that is going on RIGHT NOW – hence the Continuous Tense.

At the same time you're embedding the repetitious nature of the action into the question (by saying the word ALWAYS) because you know that the person wears the sunglasses all the time. It kind of demands the Present Simple Tense because it's a known fact, it's a repeat action.

But even though it's the fact of regularly worn sunglasses that you're actually referring to in the question (He wears sunglasses) – as implied by the word ALWAYS – **you can still refer to the ONGOING nature of the action** (He's wearing sunglasses) in the question – it's like as if you're looking at the person RIGHT NOW and making the comment in Present Continuous but actually meaning ALWAYS.

So you're perfectly fine to use Present Continuous on similar occasions and you can say things like: *"She's drinking coffee all the time, isn't it crazy?"* instead of *"She drinks coffee all the time."*

I'm not saying you definitely HAVE to speak that way.

The bottom line here is – you CAN speak like that and there's nothing wrong with it.

This just goes to show how widely used the English Present Continuous Tense is, don't you agree? Past, Future and Present – it's got so many uses that I'm truly fascinated by it!

## How To Speak About Past Events During English Conversations

***“Don’t focus on studying English grammar – go for spoken English instead!”*** – this is one of the few phrases you can read on my blog nearly every time I publish something. Reasoning behind this statement is that if you learn to speak correctly, you’ll also learn English grammar along the way.

You see – grammar is set of rules binding the words together and determining their place in a sentence. The more you learn English in a natural way, the more you’ll start developing the special “feel” for correct English grammar and you’ll instinctively know how a particular thing has to be said.

Real life conversations can sometimes go against standard English grammar rules, and it’s important for you as a foreign English speaker to be aware of such exemptions

Not that you’re required to stuff your spoken English with slang phrases and pose as a native speaker! It’s just useful to know that **sometimes you can ignore one or another grammar rule to make your speech easier and friendlier!**

In this chapter I’m discussing how native English speakers speak about past events during a conversation, and the respective choice of English Grammar Tenses. It can be quite confusing for a foreign English speaker to get the tenses right – especially when we start looking at the Perfect Tenses and such. So watch this video to see how you can make your life easier and also make your English speech sound more native!

During our daily conversations, especially if they’re informal, we use the Past Tense a lot, and that’s where foreign English speakers may start struggling with expressing themselves clearly and fast enough so that the story doesn’t lose its relevance and appeal.

Let’s say, you’re at work and you meet a co-worker of yours. You want to tell her about an argument that broke out between two other employees, so you’re saying the following: *“... and then Jamie threw the fact at her that she had left the mug on her desk the day the before as well and that she never wants to see it happen again! Donna went all red and I thought she was going to explode!”*

Let’s look at this passage and analyze it a bit from the grammar standpoint and also from conversational English point of view.

So you’re telling about an event that took place in the past, and you’re using the Simple Past Tense when starting off – *“Jamie threw the fact at her...”*. The next event, however, took place even before Jamie had the conversation with Donna, so you can’t use the Simple Past anymore. If you follow proper English grammar rules, you have to use Past Perfect instead, so you carry on with *“...that she had left the mug on her desk.”*

But now listen to what this very sentence would most likely sound like if spoken by a native English speaker: *“... and then Jamie’s throwing the fact at her that she left the mug on her desk.”*

## Using Present Tenses When Speaking About Past?!?

Are you slightly confused over the Present Continuous Tense in this sentence “... *and then Jamie’s throwing the fact at her*”? Are you wondering – “... hold on, why would a native English speaker go for Present Continuous when telling about Past events? Do you want to tell me, Robby, that native English speakers don’t use Past Tense in conversations?”

OK, let me dispel your confusion and let’s clarify the things!

Native English speakers do use Simple Past and Past Perfect Tenses, of course they do! However, this chapter's topic is about telling about a past event during a conversation and that would involve a bit lengthier story than just a few sentences. For instance, if you’re telling about what happened during your birthday party on Saturday night, you might be speaking for two, three or five minutes before you’ve revealed every interesting detail!

So while correct and proper English grammar would demand you to use the corresponding Past Tenses, **native English speakers often use Simple and Simple Progressive Tenses to tell the story!**

The reason for doing that is because it’s slightly easier to get the speech going if you can substitute Past Perfect for Simple Past, and you can speak a bit faster and in a natural manner. If native English speakers do it all the time, why would you want to sound like reading from a book? If you want to become conversationally fluent, you need to adopt natural English speaking habits, and this happens to be one of them!

And if you look at it from a story telling perspective, it does actually make sense! **By using the Present Tenses you get your listener more emotionally involved in the story**, and it heightens the whole conversation experience.

I’m going to give you another example now and you’ll be able to compare the two different types of speech! So here’s the first way of talking to your friend Mike whom you meet on a street when walking to the nearest shop to do some grocery shopping. I’ll be using proper, standard English grammar and I’ll go for Past Tenses because I’ll be telling a story about past events.

*“Oh, hello Mike, how’s things, how you’re doing! Remember we met last Friday and I told you I was gonna go out the next day to a birthday party of a friend of mine where Michelle was also invited? So I arrived and I saw her chatting in the corner with someone. I put on this careless look and walked down to her and said “Hello!” pretending I had no idea she had been saying all those terrible things behind my back!”*

And now you’ll hear the second part of the conversation changed to Present Tense.

*“So I’m arriving and I’m seeing her chatting in the corner with someone. I’m putting on the careless look and walking down to her and then I say “Hello!” pretending I have no idea she’s been saying all those terrible things behind my back!”*

Did you feel the difference? While in the first version I was telling everything in quite a normal

way, the second way of saying the whole thing did make it sound a bit more exciting, didn't it?

I was using the Present Tense, and as the very name suggests it makes it sound as if it's going on in present time, right now, at this moment! And make no mistake, though, **I'm not saying you have to start messing up your speech by randomly swapping tenses** and think that you're going to sound more natural by doing that. Especially if you're having slight issues sometimes with getting your English speech right, you have to speak correctly, no doubt about it!

What I'm saying is, that when you tell a lengthy story about something that happened a short time ago, **you CAN use Present and Present Continuous Tenses to make your chat partner more involved** and at the same time it will be a bit easier for you to speak as Present Tenses are easier to use when speaking

You don't have to worry about the past forms of irregular verbs and stuff like that, but it's actually not the main argument in favor of this type of speech during real-life English conversations.

The main reason why you'd want to do it is to sound more natural, easy-going, and make your story more exciting!

### **But It Means Interchanging Tenses In The Same Conversation?...**

Relax, you don't have to worry about mixing both – Past and Present Tenses when telling about the same event in English. People do it all the time, and there's nothing wrong with it! So read another sample sentence and pay attention to how I'm interchanging Past and Present Tenses to emphasize the main points!

Imagine that a cell phone conversation had interrupted your chat with a neighbor and you're resuming it by saying:

*“Sorry Mary, where was I? Ah, yes, I was telling you how we went down to the mall last Saturday and then the tyre just went off in a middle of highway! All I felt was a sudden jerk (Past Tense getting changed to Present Tense NOW) and the next thing I know is Jeff cursing at the top of his voice, and I'm thinking – what on Earth is going on now? (Switching back to Past Tense) The next moment I realized of course that it's the car tyre that burst, and luckily enough we pulled over and got the tyre changed in no time.”*

Did you notice how I changed over to the Present Tense in the middle of the story? Did you notice that it helped me to express the action and the emotions that were going on at the moment of the accident? I was telling about my experience as if I'm going through it once more at this very moment and it's a very powerful technique!

So start using the same speech technique when speaking in English and you'll notice that it's much easier to speak that way. Don't hesitate to speak in the Present Tense when telling a story about past events and I bet you'll feel more confident while speaking!

## ***Is Past Perfect Tense Any Good For The Average English Speaker?***

In this chapter we're going to look at a particular aspect of English Perfect Tenses that is quite often ignored by foreign English speakers. For the most part it's probably because it's not used that often in everyday English. Nonetheless, it's useful to know how and when to use the Past Perfect Tense in English!

So without a further ado, let's get to the nitty-gritty of this topic. So, as you already know, Perfect Tenses in English are used to tell about events that have already taken place but it's not really known when exactly they happened, and it's not really necessary to know that.

An example: *"I've finished my assignment on time."*

As you can see, I don't mention the exact time when I did finish my assignment, because in this context it's irrelevant. Just the very fact that I've finished it is what I want to tell you about, and that's what the Perfect Tenses in English are all about.

Now, Past Perfect is a Tense when you replace the have part in the sentence with its past form – had. So what you get is – *"I had finished my assignment"*, or its short form – *"I'd finished my assignment."*

The annoying thing about learning English Grammar and the numerous Grammar Tenses is that if you look at them on a page in your grammar book, they might not make much sense. Also, there can be so many examples given with a particular tense that you just can't make out when exactly you need to use it!

**So here's the most important practical use of the Past Perfect Tense - the most common trigger word is – BEFORE.** And the key criterion to apply the Past Perfect Tense is when you want to **describe some action that was finished by this 'before' moment!**

So when you're telling something about what happened previously and then you want to mention a finished action that had taken place even before that – you have to use the had + Past Participle combination called Past Perfect Tense.

So for example, you arrive at work early and notice that somehow a painting has fallen down. Your colleague comes in five minutes later and you want to explain to him that you didn't see how it happened. So you're saying: **"It had already happened before I arrived."**

You see – in this sentence you're putting the emphasis on the very fact of the painting falling down and, as it is a complete action which happened before you arrived, it demands Past Perfect Tense – *"it had fallen down."*

Just listen to what it would sound like if you'd use Present Perfect Tense instead – *"It HAS already happened BEFORE I arrived"*. You see, it just doesn't sound right, does it?

And now a couple more examples on occasions when Past Perfect Tense would come handy in your

English conversations.

*“How could you get ready for the night out so quickly?”*

*“Well, I had planned everything the previous day!”*

You see, on this occasion I’m putting the emphasis on the very completed action – “*had planned*” – and it’s best accomplished by using the Past Perfect Tense.

I could have actually said – “*I planned everything the previous day*” – and it wouldn’t sound incorrect. However, if you want to stress the very fact of having planned everything on the previous evening before going out the day after, then Past Perfect is definitely the way to go.

Another example - “*To my shock I discovered that the job position had been actually filled before the job interview.*”

**Here you can see all three signs of a sentence that demands the Past Perfect Tense.** **First of all** the action – “the job interview” – takes place in past. **Secondly**, there’s something that happened even before the job interview took place. **Thirdly**, this something is a complete action so – had combined with a Past Participle will explain your point most precisely!

On a finishing note I can tell you that this form isn’t too often used in conversational English. It’s not uncommon to hear the same thing said in the following way:

*“I was quite shocked to discover that they filled the position before the job interview!”*

Or

*“I was quite shocked to discover that the position was filled before the job interview!”*

You see – you can tell the same thing using simpler grammar constructs and for the most part there’s nothing wrong with it. But the bottom line here is – it’s handy to know why the Past Perfect Tense exists so that you can use it every now and then!

## ***Using Perfect Simple And Passive Voice In Spoken English***

Here's a simple phrase you'd use when you have finished doing something – *"I've done it."* This is Present Perfect Simple – a grammar form to describe an action that has been finished at some time in the past but the actual time of its completion isn't known.

Well, so far it's all fairly simple and understandable, and you shouldn't have any difficulties with using such a simple phrase.

But now let's take it one step further and look at the same phrase only in Passive Voice this time. Just a quick reminder for those not sure what Passive Voice is – it's a way of describing an event without mentioning who did it.

So for instance, *"I've done it"* is Active Voice, but *"It has been done"* is Passive Voice. You see, it isn't known who did it, or it's so obvious that there's no need to mention it.

Let's say, you're reporting to your supervisor at work after having completed your assignment. You can simply say – *"It has been done"* because he already knows that it's you who was supposed to do it.

But how many times you've got [tongue-tied when speaking English](#) because you've been trying to get the tenses perfectly correctly? And – how often you've heard a phrase *"It has been done"* having been replaced by a much simpler one – *"It's done?"*

Do you start getting my point now?

Let's have a look at a few more examples.

Let's say you're going to your shift manager to brief him on your current progress. You want to tell him that you'll have finished compiling the sales analysis data by 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

The formal way of saying it is the following – *"I will have finished the sales analysis by 4 o'clock."* A normal English sentence, nothing wrong with it.

It may present difficulties, though, to some foreign English speakers – especially those, who are struggling while speaking and are experiencing anxiety. It's not that easy to get the tenses right when speaking, and constructing a Future Perfect Simple phrase – *"I will have finished"* – can get that person tongue-tied and struggling.

**Personally I think it's easier to say the same thing the colloquial way – *"I'll BE finished with the sales analysis by 4 o'clock."***

Now look at the phrase – *"I'll be finished."* We could probably translate it as – *I'll be killed* – because it's the Passive Voice and when you say that you're finished it means exactly that – that YOU are finished. However, spoken English is a different story and you don't have to go by the letter and stick to formal English.

You can certainly say – “*I’m finished*” instead of “*I have finished*”, “*I’m done*” instead of “*I’ve done it*” and “*I was done*” instead of “*I had done it*”!

Make no mistake though – I’m not saying you should mess up all English grammar that you’ve acquired so far and start using Passive Voice instead of Active Voice.

All I’m saying is that when you’re chatting with people in informal situations you’re much better off resembling colloquial English speech patterns than risking getting stuck when speaking. Especially if you’re not perfectly familiar with all the tenses and you have to spend some time on putting the things right in your mind before speaking out loud.

**And of course – there’s no need to change your way of speaking if saying things like “*The order has been shipped out now*” present no difficulties to you!**

If you, on the other hand, aren’t really comfortable with all those “*have been’s*”, “*would have been’s*”, “*would have had’s*” – and similar tongue twisters, why make it complicated for yourself?

**All native English speakers use simplified, more colloquial versions of those grammar forms,** and it’s totally normal to say things like – “*My shift is over, I’m finished today!*” instead of “*I have finished*” – and – “*This job is done now, what’s next?*” instead of – “*This job has been done, what’s next?*”

I recall a time when I was struggling with English tenses years ago and I wanted to get them perfectly right. So I memorized the whole English tense table with the corresponding examples showing when a particular tense is used and so on.

But I still struggled to apply that knowledge in daily conversations, and had I known about more colloquial ways of saying things, I would have made my life much easier when getting around warehouse where I used to work.

So the bottom line is the following – DO learn English tenses, learn how and where they’re used. But when speaking everyday English, don’t be afraid of using simplified language even if it may sound grammatically incorrect at first.

## **Forget About WILL Future Tense - Use Present Progressive Instead!**

The standard grammatical Future Tense in English is formed using “WILL” followed by the verb’s infinitive form. However, this is far from the full picture of how you can describe future in English.

To be more precise, this is just one quarter of possibilities that the English language offers, and here are the other three ways how you can describe a future action:

*“I’m going to come home”,  
“I’m coming home”,  
“I come home”.*

Are you slightly confused? Are you thinking now – *“Why is Robby giving examples of Present Progressive and Simple Present Tenses? They’re clearly used to describe actions taking place right now, in this very moment!”*

Well, you’re right, they are used for that purpose, **but Present Progressive, for example, can also be used to describe Future actions which have already been arranged** and the very fact of the arrangement is kind of going on right now, does that make sense?

If you say *“I’m coming home tomorrow”* you mean indeed that you are going to arrive back home tomorrow, but you have apparently decided at some stage that you’ll come home. So as far as English grammar is concerned, the progressive action is already taking place – **since the moment you decided that you would come the action is kind of happening** – only taking place tomorrow instead of now!

Of course, if you make a decision right now and here, you would indeed use WILL followed by the verb and it would sound something like *“OK, I will come home tomorrow”*.

But you’ll never sound fluent if the only way to describe a future action for you is *“I will come home”*. In fact, this grammar form WILL followed by a verb isn’t that often used in real English and it’s very badly overused by foreign English speakers

But how do you know which grammar form to use next time when you have a chat with someone and talk about future events? I know that when you speak you don’t have much time to think about how you’re going to create the sentence and if you do that, your speech becomes very slow and hesitant.

When you open your mouth, you have to produce an instantaneous speech, so all the grammar rules have to be incorporated into your English naturally; you can’t be imagining a list of rules and choosing a grammar form which is the most fitting one for a particular situation...

### **Present Progressive – the PRIMARY English Future Tense!**

I want you to think of the **Present Progressive Tense** – *“I’m eating out tonight”* **as the PRIMARY way of describing future actions!**

You see, Present Progressive isn't used only to describe ongoing events – it can be used, for example, to tell about Past events.

The same goes with events taking place in Future – the Present Progressive Tense is used a lot to talk about those actions that are to take place at some stage in the near future and the decision about them has been made before the conversation happens. And if you think about it, the biggest part of all future activities you talk about on a daily basis are decisions made by people, so no wonder Present Progressive Tense is used extensively in conversational English.

If you want to ask your friend what he has planned for tonight, you don't say: "*What will you do tonight?*" You simply have to use Present Progressive and say: "*What are you doing tonight?*"

Technically it's Present Tense, but **in this case your question is about your friend's future activities** and when you ask it, you assume that your friend has already decided what to do. And regardless whether he has or has not, the nature of your question doesn't change, and the same goes with similar questions you'd ask on a daily basis.

*"Are we doing the test today?"*

*"Is Bill coming with us to see the match on Saturday?"*

Let's say you want to remind your boss that you're taking your holidays in two weeks. Many foreigners would say: "*I just want to remind you I will take my holidays in a fortnight.*" It doesn't sound completely wrong, and any English speaker – be it a native or a foreign English speaker – would definitely understand what you're saying.

But if you say: "*I just want to remind you I'm taking my holidays in a fortnight*" you do sound much better, because **that's exactly how a fluent English speaker would speak!**

It's an arranged event – you obviously spoke with your boss earlier during the year about your holidays and now you're just reminding him of something that is about to happen. So if you want to be fluent – start using Present Progressive Tense when speaking about future events!

### **Using Present Progressive for Future isn't Stressed Enough in Mainstream Education...**

If you check any English grammar reference book you'll see that it says "*You CAN use Present Progressive (Continuous) Tense for future arrangements which are decisions from the past for the near future.*"

The problem is, however, that very often this gets completely ignored because it's not usually stressed enough. They say that you CAN use it, yes, but usually that reference sits at the end of the Present Progressive chapter although its proper place would be in the Future Tenses chapter!

So foreigners stick with using the WILL Future form whenever they talk about future events, but please bear in mind that you can use the WILL Future Tense only when you make a decision at the moment of speaking!

Most of the references you're going to make about future actions during daily conversations with friends and work colleagues will refer to decisions that have already been made.

These are the future activities that have been arranged, they're nearly a FACT – and don't confuse them with future actions that are just plans and it's not really known whether they're going to happen.

*“She's calling round tonight at 8 PM; you can come along if you want!”*

*“Courier isn't coming this evening, we may cancel all deliveries.”*

*“I'm meeting with my ex this weekend for a cup of coffee.”*

If you think about all these above examples, you'll realize that **those actions have been obviously arranged** or not arranged as with the courier who isn't coming (but still the very nature of a courier visit is that it's usually arranged!).

Similarly, a big part of our daily conversations when we're communicating with other English speakers would refer to events that have been arranged previously at some stage, so you can confidently use the Present Progressive Tense.

Just try to imagine a conversation you'd normally have with someone at work, college or at home. Much of the stuff you'd be talking about would be about what you or the other person has committed to do tonight or tomorrow or at some other stage in the near future.

*“What are you doing over the weekend?”* is a proper way of asking the question instead of *“What will you do over the weekend?”* Yes, the WILL form is the actual grammatical Future Tense, and if your mind is in the [translation mode from your native language](#), you probably do a direct translation...

If that's your habit – please stop doing it right now and as I said earlier on – **start perceiving the Present Progressive – “What are you doing” - as the main way of describing Future actions in conversational English.**

*“Martha isn't coming back, she's sick!”* – instead of *“Martha won't come back”*.

*“I'm babysitting tonight, I can't go with you folks, sorry!”* – instead of *“I will baby-sit.”*

You see – all these actions that I just mentioned have been decided earlier on. Before you can tell someone that Martha isn't coming back, you must have spoken with her before, otherwise how you could know that she's not coming back? Same goes with babysitting – it's been arranged and now you're stating a fact and you're not deciding it right now, you knew it all along that you'd baby-sit tonight, right?

**Use Present Progressive when Talking about Typical Daily Arrangements**

So – anything you want to talk or ask about that concerns future actions that are arranged – is to be used as Present Progressive. And it's typical that such actions concern plans people have made about going out, meeting up somewhere, doing something, coming or not coming to work or school, in other words – they're all those little daily future actions we normally talk about and that were committed to do.

So here's another typical example.

*“How's your sister, **is she coming** to work?”  
“No, she's still sick; **she's staying** at home till Tuesday.”*

We have to use the Present Progressive Tense here because coming or not coming to work is a decision that your chat partner's sister would normally have **already decided** upon. And even if you get an answer: *“I don't know, she didn't tell me”*, it doesn't change the NATURE of the question.

Even if you were chatting with the sister and you would expect to make her mind up right now, you'd ask the question the same way. The conversation would sound like this:

*“So **are you coming** to work tomorrow or not?”  
“Well... OK, I'll come in but I'm still **not feeling** well.”*

You see – she made up her mind right at the moment of the conversation - hence the WILL + verb Future Tense - but it still doesn't affect your question!

After all, you can't always know if the person you're talking to has decided upon the particular thing or not, and you'd really be going mad by trying to adjust your English speech to any possibility – whether the person has decided or not, or if they're about to decide now, or in five minutes, or whatever, so don't make it all so complicated for yourself!

The bottom line here is the following:

**From this moment and on start perceiving the Present Progressive Tense as the basic English Grammar Tense for describing future actions during daily conversations!** These actions are the ones people would normally arrange previously and it makes up a huge part of spoken English!

As you can see, the Present Progressive Tense is amazing. You can use it to describe actions that are going on now at this very moment, or past actions when you're telling a story about them, or future activities that are arranged.

*“Don't interrupt me; don't you see I'm telling a story? So where was I?” (Present)*

*“Oh yes, I remember now. So we're entering the night club and then all of a sudden...” (Past)*

*“Sorry, I have to go now, are you coming along tonight?” (Future)*

You see – I just used the Present Progressive to describe Past, Present and Future and you can

memorize this list to do the same:

- Things that are going on at this very moment;
- Telling a friendly story about what went on;
- Talking about future arrangements.

It's going to make your daily conversations much easier and you'll definitely sound more native and fluent.

But of course, you can't use Present Progressive Tense all the time, so in the next chapter we'll look at other ways to describe Future actions. "Will" followed by a verb in infinitive, "Going to" form and also Simple Present can be used to talk about future and each of those grammar forms serve their purpose and they're also necessary.

However, I'd say you'd sound much better if you overused Present Progressive rather than the Future Tense in your spoken English. English teachers would probably kill me for saying that, but I really think that the standard "*I Will ...*" sounds like taken right from the grammar book.

Way too many foreigners use it as the only way of speaking about future actions and it sounds really bad!

## **WILL and GOING TO English Future Forms – How to Use Them in Conversations**

On 9 times out of 10 foreign English speakers use the traditional WILL + verb in infinitive Future Tense when speaking about future events, but it transpires that this grammar form is being massively overused.

Many future events we talk about on a daily basis have been arranged prior to the conversation, so we can confidently use Present Progressive instead. For instance, you have to say *“Sorry, I’m watching a very interesting TV program tonight”* instead of *“I will watch a very interesting TV program tonight”* if you have a conversation with your friend and he asks you if you can go out with him tonight.

By now you’re probably getting slightly confused over my ramblings on future in spoken English. Judging by what I’ve been saying previously you may think that WILL + verb and GOING TO future forms are redundant and there’s no need to use them.

Especially taking into account I’ve told you that you’d be better off overusing Present Progressive rather than the WILL Future Tense – it may sound as if I’m saying that you can speak English and use Present Progressive ONLY when it comes to talking about future events. Well, it’s not so. Other Future forms are also necessary; you just need to know WHEN to use them

So let’s look at the traditional English Future Tense – WILL + verb in infinitive and also the GOING TO Future form and how to use them in conversational English.

### **WILL + Verb in Infinitive Future Tense**

Firstly, **we can use this traditional English Future Tense when we make an instant decision**, as opposed to an arranged event when we use Present Progressive.

Typically such decisions are preceded by words *“OK”* and *“All Right”* in conversations. For example, when you’re asked if you could do something for the other person, you’d reply with something like *“OK, I’ll do it, no problems.”* Another example – *“All right, I’ll bring this parcel up to the 3rd floor.”* Can you feel a difference between this sentence and the following one *“I’m bringing this parcel up to the 3rd floor later on”*?

The difference is the following. The **Present Continuous tense is used when you’ve made the decision about bringing the parcel up BEFORE the conversation**. So when I asked you about it, you already knew that you were bringing it up later on, so you can confidently tell me *“I’m bringing it up later on”*. But if you hadn’t intended to bring up the parcel before the question was asked, you’d have to use the standard Future Tense – *“OK, I’ll bring it up”*.

So make it your habit to use the WILL Future Tense whenever you make instant decisions, or you offer to help someone out with something – like *“Hold on, hold on, I’ll lift it up there, it’s too heavy for you!”*

*“OK, I’ll do the report for you, but please bear in mind it’ll take me at least 2 hours!”*

*“Will you help me, please?”*

*“I’ll make sure it never happens again, please give me the second chance!”*

The second application of the **WILL + Infinitive Future Tense is to express your ATTITUDE towards reality**. In real life it would be used with words like *“I think”, “I reckon”, “maybe”, “probably”, “I don’t think”* and similar.

Whenever you start your sentence with such words and similar, most likely you’ll follow it up with WILL Future Tense. Bear in mind, however, that to use this Future Tense your statement must be purely based on your own reasoning, there would be no actual evidence you would base your opinion on. So you can use it whenever YOU think something will or won’t happen, in other words – **whenever you PREDICT something**.

*“I think the sales figures will go up next year.”*

*“Maybe it will be sunny, maybe it won’t, how can I know?”*

*“My mom will always act the same, I can’t change her!”*

You see – all the sample sentences I just used to depict the Future Tense usage express the speaker’s attitude towards reality. For example, in the first sentence I’m expressing only my personal opinion and it’s not backed up by any real data, or anything, it’s just something that I believe is true, therefore I use the WILL Future Tense.

### GOING TO Future Form

If the conversation takes place after I have looked at some sales figures, it would be a different story. Then I’d use the GOING TO Future form because I would have some external evidence that the sales figures might go up and I would say *“I think the sales figures are GOING TO go up next year.”*

You see – it’s not always that you use the WILL + verb future form to express your attitude; as I just said – if your opinion is formed by some external evidence, something that you can see or something that someone has told you – then you have to use the GOING TO future form

Look back at this sentence – *“Maybe it will be sunny.”* Most likely you’d say such a thing even without looking at the sky. Let’s say, a phone call wakes up early in the morning and your friends offers to go to the beach during the day. As there are no indications yet as to what the weather will be like, you can just say – *“Maybe it will be sunny”* because in this case you’re just voicing your own opinion.

If you look out the window and you see clear sky without a single cloud, it’s more or less obvious that the day is GOING TO be beautiful. So now you can definitely say *“Hey dude, it looks that it’s*

*GOING TO be sunny, I'll start packing my bag!*" But now comes the interesting part – actually it wouldn't be wrong if said the same thing using the standard Future Tense – *"Hey dude, it looks it'll be sunny, I'll start packing my bag!"*

You see, **in spoken English you can use either WILL or GOING TO when you predict something**, because on many occasions it's not so easy to draw a line between your own opinion and an opinion that has been formed based on some external factors!

You would nearly want to analyze every sentence you speak to make sure you use the perfect future grammar form for the particular situation, and that would make it impossible to communicate normally. Every time you'd want to voice your opinion about something, you'd start thinking whether your statement is based purely on your own logical conclusions or you actually did use some other indicators to come to that conclusion.

For example, your supervisor asks you if Mark is coming to work today. If you do know that he's definitely not coming – like if he told you that on the phone, or you spoke to him the night before, you'd use the Present Continuous – *"No, Mark's not coming in today."*

But if you don't know if he's coming or not, you can use the standard Future Tense – *"No, I don't know if he'll come."* However, you might also be slightly suspicious that Mark had gone out the previous night and he's sick this morning, and that would count as external evidence, right? So you can also say *"No, I don't think he's going to come in today."*

But now think about it deeper. All right, you kind of think that Mark might have gone out and had a few more beers than he can handle, but does it make it hard evidence? Maybe he didn't go anywhere, and he's on the way to work stuck in the traffic! So were does it leave you with choosing the proper future form? Are you really going to analyze every life situation in depth and spend five minutes before answering every question just to make sure you're using the correct future grammar form?

That would be insane, my friend, so here what I suggest you do!

### **What to Do When in Doubt:**

1) **For instant decisions and offers to help use the WILL + verb future** as we looked at first thing in this chapter. *"Don't worry, I'll help you!"*

2) When making statements about something that is **obviously GOING TO happen**, which means that you have real hard evidence, use the GOING TO future form without much thinking. For example, if you're watching a soccer match and your team is two goals down and the match has gone into the 80th minute you can definitely say *"Well, looks like they're not going to win."*

You can also substitute the *"going to"* part with more casual *"gonna"* – and make it *"Well, looks like they're not gonna win."*

But listen to the following sentences:

*“I don’t think we’re going to have a meeting today.”*

*“Do you think she’s gonna tell her friend about what happened?”*

*“He’s gonna lose, that’s for sure!”*

If you used the WILL Future form instead in all those sentences, they would still sound OK:

*“I don’t think we’ll have a meeting.”*

*“Do you think she’ll tell her friend?”*

*“He’ll lose, that’s for sure!”*

3) So I’d say on many occasions **you can use both WILL and GOING TO Future forms during conversations** when it comes to voicing your opinion regarding to what’s GOING TO happen. **In spoken English these WILL and GOING TO forms are interchangeable**, but bear in mind – there are those specific situations which demand that you use the standard Future Tense.

As I said previously – instant decisions and offers to help go with WILL Future Tense, and also those statements when you obviously use only your own judgment to express your opinion. It’s more when you express your feelings towards the fact – like *“I think (believe) he’ll make it this time.”* But if you actually see that person performing the action and it’s more or less obvious that he’s GOING TO make it, then yes, you can also say *“He’s GOING TO make this time!”*

### **GOING TO Future Form with Future Plans**

The GOING TO Future form is also used to talk about planned future activities. Let’s say you intend to join yoga classes in the local gym, and now you’re announcing this news to your family:  
*“You know, I’m going to do yoga classes in the local gym.”*

*“Suzy is going to help me with homework; she’s very good at math.”*

*“We’re going to have another baby in a couple years.”*

*“I’m going to move to another house, I can’t stand these crazy house parties every weekend!”*

All these sample sentences talk about future plans, and please note that **these decisions have been made before the conversation** so I’m not using the WILL + infinitive verb Future form. **Also these plans aren’t arrangements yet**, so I’m not using Present Progressive Tense either.

They are just general intentions, something that you’ve been planning or discussing with someone but you haven’t arranged an exact time yet.

You spoke to Suzy, and she agreed to help you out with your homework. Now you’re chatting with your sister and you’re telling her *“Suzy is going to help me with my homework.”* This plan becomes

an arrangement the moment you and Suzy agree on an actual time and date. Then you can use Present Progressive – *“Suzy’s helping me out with my homework tomorrow!”*

You see – it’s very interesting how future forms work in the English language, you always have a few of them to choose from. A few minutes ago we looked at how you can choose between WILL and GOING TO future forms when expressing your opinion towards future, and now we’re looking at how to choose between Present Progressive and GOING TO Future when talking about future plans.

**But there’s a huge difference between those two.** While the WILL and GOING TO future forms are conversationally interchangeable when it comes to making conclusion as to what will or what’s GOING TO happen, future plans and arrangements are more distinct.

It’s quite simple to distinguish between something that you or someone else is just planning to do and something that has already been arranged for a specific time in the future.

### Let’s Wrap It All Up!

As a conclusion, let’s go back to all Future Tenses in English so that you can clearly see what is what!

So first, **right at the moment when a decision is made, you use the WILL + verb Future Tense** – *“I’ll visit my grandma; I haven’t seen her a long time”*.

After the decision has been made, but if the time for the visit hasn’t been made clear yet, **it becomes a plan.** So the next time you mention this fact to someone, you use the GOING TO future form because this is already a plan of yours, you’re not making the decision now – *“I’m GOING TO visit my grandma.”*

When you decide on exactly when you’re visiting your grandma, **the plan becomes an arrangement** and now you can say – *“I’m visiting my grandma tonight!”*

At last, we have those situations when you express your attitude towards future by voicing your opinion and as we concluded previously, in **conversational English GOING TO is as good as WILL Future form on most occasions.**

And when you’re having an informal chat, don’t hesitate to use “GOING TO” colloquial form *“gonna.”* *“Sooner or later it’s gonna happen”* – it’s a perfect example of how you can make simple judgments and assumptions about future without fretting too much over which Future form to use – WILL or GOING TO.

On the finishing note, I have one more concern to address. Remember when I said in the last chapter that **you should perceive Present Progressive Tense as the basic grammar tense when talking about future actions?** If you’re wondering why I said so – here’s the reason behind it.

Assuming that you live in an English speaking country or at least work in an English speaking environment, you’re spending much of your time at work communicating with colleagues,

customers and superiors. **The majority of future references you're making on a regular basis are arranged events** – phone calls, technicians' visits, and just about any other future event you'd discuss in work-related communication would be some sort of an arrangement or pre-planned action. That's why I'm telling to regard Present Progressive Tense which would be used to describe these sorts of future actions as the main one.

Also, I just want you to get rid of the habit of using WILL Future Tense on every occasion, and as I said in the last chapter, you'd better overuse Present Progressive than the standard Future Tense!

## ***Future In The Past - Often Ignored But Very Useful!***

Have you ever heard of Future in the Past Tense? The chances are – you haven't! It's quite weird, but it's true – many English Grammar books and English learning websites simply ignore Future in the Past!

So here's how it works – **whenever you're re-telling past events, the word WILL becomes WOULD – when referring to future during your story.**

Example: *“After the first week in the gym I decided I WOULD never quit!”*

Before I had learned this simple grammar rule about using Future in the Past, I would say the above sentence using the word WILL:

*“After the first week in the gym I decided I WILL never quit it!”*

How wrong was I... And how wrong are thousands of other foreign English speakers! Yes, I've met quite fluent English speakers in my life who still kept on making the same mistake – using WILL when describing future events from the past perspective.

If you're wondering why is this Future in the Past Tense often ignored by English teaching industry and foreign English speakers – here's a very reasonable explanation.

If you see a word WOULD used in a sentence like – *“I told him I WOULD call back”* – you might think it's used to describe a probable action like in conditional sentences.

And indeed if you're saying something like – *“I WOULD call back if I had enough time”* – the word *“would”* implies probability. In other words – something you would do if the circumstances were different.

But in this situation it wouldn't make sense to use the word WILL as you're not describing a future decision. So this reasoning **makes us assume that the word WOULD is used only when describing actions with a certain degree of probability.**

And even if you're been reading somewhere about Future in the Past – did it say that you MUST change WILL to WOULD when describing future decisions from the past perspective? Most likely it didn't, and I'm really shocked about it!

You've probably learned all types of conditionals and know how to use them, but you're still saying things like – *“I told my brother I will start looking for a new job next week.”*

It's not one of those grammar rules that can be ignored like skipping the word *“do”* or *“does”* when starting a question. You can say *“You did it?”* instead of *“Did you do it?”* – and in a real life conversation it will be fine, no-one will notice that. But if you say – *“Didn't I tell you I'LL do it?”* – any native speaker will notice the mistake (but don't be too hung up about this – [on many occasions they won't](#) because this isn't really a serious mistake).

Future in the Past is one of those things that definitely adds a native touch to your English and you just have to say – “*Didn't I tell you I'D do it?*”

Also please note that the word WOULD shortens and becomes ‘*d* – “*I'd*” instead of “*I would*”.

So to make your English speech more native and fluent, please **drop the “will’s” and ‘ll’s when telling stories about past events and referring to future decisions or events** throughout the story. Use “*would*” and ‘*d* instead!

*“I rang in sick today and told my boss I wouldn't come in till Monday.”*

*“Didn't I tell you I'd go shopping today?”*

By the way – if you've been thinking that this ‘*d* means “*would*” as in describing probable actions – you're wrong! It's the word “*will*” that becomes a ‘*d* in a story where the main action takes place in the past!

So you see – little things like this grammar rule can make a BIG difference in English fluency!

### 3 Grammar Mistakes Which Are OK in Spoken English

Any foreign English speaker should be familiar with proper English grammar – there’s no doubt about that (although I have met some foreigners whose grammar was terrible yet they spoke fluent English ...)

There are occasions, however, when being intentionally wrong is just fine, and just like everything else I discuss on [my blog](#) it pertains to spoken English for the most part. Also bear in mind that while you can afford using language illustrated in this chapter, **I’m not encouraging you to adopt these mistakes as normal part of your speech** to an extent that you nearly forget what the correct way of saying this or that particular thing is.

But then again – it all depends on your personal circumstances. If you use English exclusively as means of verbal communication at work, for instance, and in other informal settings, and you don’t have to write or be involved where formal language is used – I don’t think your English should be judged by how grammatically correctly you speak.

Yes, I don’t think you should aim for grammatical perfection because I’m a firm believer in being practical and using the English language the way you need it. You don’t have to subject your spoken English to the whims of [academically minded perfectionists!](#)

One way or another, I think you should read this chapter to see which English grammar mistakes have seeped so deep into the spoken language that they can hardly be considered mistakes at all.

At least when someone points them out to you, you’ll be able to respond with confidence – “*Common, it’s OK to say that, it’s not a big deal!*”

#### 1. Referring to plural nouns in third-person singular of the verb ‘to be’.

“*Hi Michael, here’s the orders you asked for!*” The grammatically correct way of making such a statement would be – “*Hi Michael, here ARE the orders you asked for!*” – but it’s become commonplace to use the third-person singular instead, especially after words such as ‘here’ and ‘there’.

“*There’s two types of free phone numbers – 1300 and 1800.*” As I type this sentence, the spellchecker built into MS Word offers me to correct this mistake and of course “*There ARE two types...*” is the grammatically correct construct.

Well, normally I wouldn’t be bothered correcting it even when writing a blog post for my website simply because it’s acceptable for spoken English, and personally [I write as I speak](#). Writing a more formal piece would be different, however, and as I said earlier – you have to know proper grammar, but you also have to know when you can afford being selective and choose not to be 100% correct!

Another example – “*We’re ready to set out for a hiking trip, here’s all the things we need – a tent, a sleeping bag and canned food.*” If you follow English grammar rules to the letter, you should say “*... here ARE all the things we need...*” In spoken English, however, it’s perfectly fine to say “*...*”

*here's all the things we need...*” and it's up to you to choose how you're going to say it.

## **2. Not observing correct word order in interrogative sentences beginning with a 'wh' word ('why', 'where', 'when' etc).**

If I asked you which one of the following is the grammatically correct sentence – “*Why it's happening?*” or “*Why is it happening?*” – you'd say that the latter one is the proper way of forming the question, right?

That's correct, but did you know that in casual conversations no-one would pay much attention if you went with the former one – “*Why it's happening?*”

I'm guessing the reason why it doesn't sound way too wrong is because such a grammar construct does actually exist as an embedded question which we looked at in the fourth chapter of this eBook. If you precede the question with a few more words, it becomes grammatically correct to use the standard word order – “*Can anyone tell me why it's happening?*” The reason for this is because the question becomes a noun clause within a larger, complex sentence and the reverse word order isn't necessary in that case.

When you speak, however, you may just as well choose to leave the first part of the sentence out but still have it in your mind, so to speak. It's as if you're speaking the first part of the sentence quietly to yourself – “*I can't figure out...*” – and then say the rest out loud – “*... why it's happening?*”

“*Where we're going? I thought we had to go back home to fetch the schoolbooks and then go to the college?*” If you go by the English grammar textbook, “*where ARE we going?*” is the grammar construct you should use. When you have a real-life conversation with someone, however, “*where we're going?*” is totally acceptable because it's much easier and faster to say!

## **3. Dropping the auxiliary verb “to be”, “to have” and “to do” from the beginning of an interrogative sentence.**

“*You really didn't know about it?*” instead of “*DID you really not know about it?*”

“*Sleep well?*” instead of “*DID you sleep well?*”

“*We're doing the shopping today or what? Make up your mind!*” instead of “*ARE we doing the shopping today or what?*”

“*You've lost your wallet again? I can't believe it!*” instead of “*HAVE you lost your wallet again?*”

All the examples above have one thing in common – they're statements used as questions and it's very, very common in spoken English. In fact, one might not regard this as a grammar mistake at all if you consider that all you're really doing is just adding a different intonation to a statement thus making it a question.

And if you think about it, you can actually take ANY statement and change its meaning just by using different intonations; changing the word order according to the intended purpose might be a

secondary consideration on certain occasions. Especially if the person repeats the initial sentence and makes it into a question simply by adding their emotions to the response:

“Mark got a raise” – simple statement with no emotions.

“Mark got a raise???” – the other person finds himself in a state of shock and disbelief; he repeats the initial statement and makes it into a question without changing the word order.



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