

WHEN TO USE SHALL AND WILL IN ENGLISH

Once upon a time, grammarians insisted on the following distinctions in the use of “will” and “shall” when expressing a future action in English.

	Simple Futurity		Determination, Promise, or Command	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1st Person	<i>I shall</i>	<i>We shall</i>	<i>I will</i>	<i>We will</i>
2nd Person	<i>You will</i>	<i>You will</i>	<i>You shall</i>	<i>You shall</i>
3rd Person	<i>He/she/it will</i>	<i>They will</i>	<i>He/she/it shall</i>	<i>They shall</i>

In present American usage, however, *will* has become the universal word to express futurity regardless of the person of the subject or the nuance of the future event, while the use of *shall* has been restricted to: 1) interrogatives asking for permission or agreement (“Shall we go outside?”) and 2) legal documents where there is a desire to indicate obligation (“The tenant shall...”).

Unlike other many aspects of English that are slowly fading in contemporary usage (e.g. the postpositive *however*), the distinction between *will* and *shall* was never founded in historical grammar or universal usage. It was, in the words of Professor Gustave Artlt, “a nineteenth-century affectation [that] certain grammarians have tried hard to establish and perpetuate... [T]hey have not succeeded.”

So, feel free to use *will* at will.

For more, see *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, from which this handout was prepared.