Future in the Past - Lesson and exercises

Future in the Past is sometimes described as 'the future seen from the past'. But it's really more like 'the future seen from the past which is in turn seen from now':

Somebody thinks about the future:
- I will be meeting her later on.
Sometime later we look back at him thinking about the future:
- He knew he would be meeting her later on.
I think about the future:
- I'm going to buy a new computer today.
The next day I remember:
I was going to buy a computer yesterday, but then I realised I couldn't afford it.
The newspapers announce something that's going to happen:
- There is to be a tax cut.
Sometime later I remember reading about it:
- I read that there was to be a tax cut.

That's just about the the basis of it. Learn more by doing these exercises, and at the same time brush up your knowledge of future forms, future expressions with the verb *to be* and future time clauses.

Not everyone seems to agree as to exactly what to include in 'Future in the Past'. So do this exercise as a little experiment, although there isn't necessarily a right answer.

Exercise 1 - Tick/check the boxes in Column A for the sentences which you think are 'Future in the Past', ignoring the B and C columns for the time being. Then check and click on Show explanation which will also tell you how to complete the exercise.

		A	B	C
1.	She said that she would be home by eight.	○	○	○
2.	He somehow knew that she would be home late.	○	○	○
3.	I wondered if she would be home at her usual time.	○	○	○
4.	She was going to do it yesterday, but forgot.	○	○	○
5.	She promised she was going do it the next day.	○	○	○
6.	He asked when she was going to do it.	○	○	○
7.	She asked me when and where we were to meet them.	○	○	○
8.	They told us we were to meet them after work.	○	○	○
9.	We were to meet them outside the cinema.	○	○	○

Standard future forms

Exercise 2 - Just to remind yourself of the main future forms, match these future forms with their functions. ?

1. Future simple - *will*
2. *Going to*
3. Present continuous
4. Present simple
5. Future continuous
6. Future perfect
7. Future perfect continuous

a) for events happening around a certain time in the future, or that will happen in the normal course of events, rather than being part of your plans and intentions.
b) for longer events happening before a certain time in the future, but not necessarily finished.
c) for actions that have already been decided, plans, intentions
d) for timetabled and scheduled events
e) for events that will be completed before a certain time in the future
f) for decisions made at the time of speaking, predictions, promises
g) for arrangements(e.g. it's in your diary)

Future in the Past - standard future forms

We can use all these forms and more in Future in the Past. Simply change the form to a past one, just like in reported speech.

Future simple - *will* changes to *would*
am / is / are going to changes to *was / were going to*
Present continuous - *is/are meeting* changes to *was / were meeting* etc.,

Exercise 3 - Enter a suitable verb from the box into each gap, choosing the correct future form for the function and then converting it into a past form.

Each of the seven future forms you looked at in Exercise 2 is used once only. Where appropriate use British spelling (the program is fussy!)

become · meet · stay · leave · travel · serve · finish

1. At the age of eight, I decided I _____ a pilot when I grew up.
2. We knew she _____ for ten hours by the time she arrived at our house later that night, so she was probably going to be very tired.
3. According to his ticket, the flight _____ at 06.00, so he still had plenty of time.
4. He left home early as he _____ his cousin off the flight from London.
5. He suggested that, as we _____ lunch by 2pm, he would order the taxi for 2.30.
6. We were going for a picnic and hoped the weather _____ sunny.
7. At breakfast, we were told that they _____ lunch at 1pm, as usual.

Did it happen or not?

We can usually tell from the context whether the event referred to in the Future in the Past expression happened or not, but sometimes we may not be able to tell.

Exercise 4a - Match the beginnings of the sentences in the top part to their endings in the bottom part, then check. ?

Exercise 4b - Do you think the event happened? Tick/check yes, no or don't know and check to see if you agree with my interpretation.

		yes	no	don't know
1.	I was going to buy a new computer yesterday,	○	○	○
2.	I decided I was going to buy a new computer,	○	○	○
3.	I thought the train left at six,	○	○	○
4.	It looked possible I would be late,	○	○	○
5.	This time I was going to be early,	○	○	○
6.	I was going to call you earlier,	○	○	○
7.	I would be seeing him later,	○	○	○
8.	I thought she was buying the tickets,	○	○	○
9.	I was going to write the report in the morning,	○	○	○
10.	I knew I would regret what I'd just said,	○	○	○
11.	I'd heard she was going to start a new job,	○	○	○
12.	I knew he would be going out for lunch,	○	○	○

a) so I started to panic a bit.
b) and I did, almost immediately.
c) so I left in plenty of time.
d) but I don't know whether she did or not.
e) so I didn't bother calling.
f) but I decided I couldn't really afford it.
g) but I had got the wrong end of the stick.
h) so I called him before he left.
i) but I had misread the timetable.
j) but something came up.
k) so I went to the techie shops in Charing Cross Road.
l) but it completely slipped my mind.

would

When used with the main verb in the first form *would* means that something did happen. This is used more often in written English.

He would later achieve great success as a TV chef.
She would go on to become the most popular author of her time.
Only later would they find out the truth.

But in subordinate clauses it is just the past form of *will* , and whether it happened or not depends on the context.

He knew he would be able to do it.
She hoped she would arrive in time.
They decided they would skip lunch.

was/were to and *was/were to have* + past participle

These expressions are used to talk about events that were still in the future at a certain time in the past. Note the following:

When we use *was/were to have* + **past participle** the meaning is similar to *was/were meant/supposed to* - something was arranged but didn't happen.
He was to have finished it by Friday. (but he didn't)

When we use *was/were to* + **infinitive** to simply state a fact, something did happen.
Later that year he was to win the World Championship (and he did)

Many books and websites say there is always this difference. But I think sometimes, at least informally, we also use *was/were to* + **infinitive** to mean *was/were meant/supposed to*, in which case it probably didn't happen, or at least hasn't happened yet. In this case we often stress *was/were*
*They **were** to contact us today.* (and they haven't, at least not yet)
And this example from Language Leader Advanced:
The ministers were to meet at the Pariah Fashion Show, but it was cancelled after the bombs.

would (with main verb) or *was/were*?

Both of these expressions are quite formal and are mostly used in written English. I confess I can find very little if any difference in meaning between the two.

Later that year he would win the World Championship
Later that year he was to win the World Championship

Exercise 5 - Look at these sentences and choose the most likely ending to complete the sentence. (The answers may be open to interpretation)

1. This was the man she was to marry. ...
   a) ○ and spend the rest of her life with.
   b) ○ but she never turned up to the wedding.
   c) ○ Either ending is equally likely.
2. She was to meet me outside the cinema, ...
   a) ○ and arrived a few minutes after me.
   b) ○ but she never turned up.
   c) ○ Either ending is equally likely.
3. It was to take them several hours to put the fire out, ...
   a) ○ but it took them two days.
   b) ○ but they managed it in the end.
4. It was to have been the best day of her life, ...
   a) ○ but it ended in disaster.
   b) ○ and that was just what it was.
   c) ○ Either ending is equally likely.
5. He was to spend the rest of his life in Scotland ...
   a) ○ but emigrated to New Zealand.
   b) ○ writing best-selling novels.
   c) ○ Either ending is equally likely.
6. The Games were to be held in Ruritania, ...
   a) ○ but had to be moved due to the Ruritanian crisis.
   b) ○ and turned out to be a great success.
   c) ○ Either ending is equally likely.

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