

# Sequence of tenses: when the main clause is in the present or future tense

Sometimes the time expressed in the main clause is different from the time expressed in a subordinate clause. This can confuse ESL students because they don't know whether it is appropriate to use different tenses in the different clauses of a sentence. Modal verbs also convey a sense of time. They can be confusing too. We hope this lesson will be helpful to all students who are worried about using tense sequences correctly.

## When the main clause is in the present or future tense

When the main clause is in the present or future tense, the verb of the subordinate clause can be in any tense. You just need to make sure that the meaning is conveyed accurately. Read the following sentences.

John will ask what I did with the money. (Main clause - simple future; subordinate clause - simple past)

John will ask what I am going to do with the money. (Subordinate clause - present continuous tense)

John will ask what I have done with the money. (Subordinate clause - present perfect tense)

John will ask what I had done with the money. (Subordinate clause - past perfect tense)

In all the sentences given above, the main clause (John will ask) is in the simple future tense. In this case, the subordinate clause can be in any tense. Your choice of tense should depend upon the meaning you want to convey. That's all.

Now consider another set of examples. In this case, the main clause is in the simple present tense. Therefore, the subordinate clause can be in any tense.

He says that he will pay the dues. (Main clause - simple present tense; subordinate clause - simple future tense)

He says that he has paid the dues. (Main clause - simple present tense; subordinate clause - present perfect tense)

He says that he had paid the dues. (Main clause - simple present tense; subordinate clause -

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past perfect tense)

He says that he is going to pay the dues. (Main clause – simple present tense; subordinate clause – present continuous tense)