

Be to + infinitive; be about to + infinitive

A

Be to + infinitive is commonly used in news reports to talk about events that are likely to happen in the near future:

- Police officers **are to visit** every home in the area.
- The main Rome-to-Naples railway line **is to be reopened** today. (passive form)

It is also used to talk about formal or official arrangements, formal instructions, and to give orders:

- You **are not to leave** the school without my permission.
- The European Parliament **is to introduce** a new law on safety at work.
- Children **are not to be left** unsupervised in the museum. (passive form)

Passive forms are often used to make orders and instructions more impersonal.

Note that we only use **be to + infinitive** to talk about future events that can be controlled by people.

Compare:

- In the next few years, thousands of speed cameras **are to appear** on major roads. (or ... **will appear** ...) *and*
- Scientists say they can't predict when or where the disease **will appear** again. (not ... the disease is to appear again; the appearance of the disease can't be controlled)
- The President **is to return** to Brazil later today. (or ... **will return** ...) *and*
- The comet **will return** to our solar system in around 500 years. (not The comet is to return ...; the movement of the comet can't be controlled)

However, when **be to + infinitive** refers to the future from the past (see Unit 14B), we often use it to describe what happened to someone, whether they were able to influence events or not:

- Matthew Flinders sailed past Tasmania in 1770, but it **was to be** a further 30 years before he landed there.
- Clare Atkins **was to write** two more books about her experiences in Africa before her death in 1997.

B

We often use **be to + infinitive** in **if-clauses** to say that something must happen first (in the main clause) before something else can happen (in the **if-clause**):

- If* the human race **is to survive**, we must look at environmental problems now.
- The law needs to be revised *if* justice **is to be done**. (passive form)

Compare the use of **be to + infinitive** and the present simple for the future in **if-clauses**:

- If Lopez **is to win** gold at the next Olympics, he needs to work on his fitness. *and*
- If Lopez **wins** gold at the next Olympics, he has said that he will retire from athletics.

Note how the order of cause and effects in **if-sentences** is reversed with these two tenses:

- If Lopez **is to win** gold ... (= effect), he needs to work ... (= cause) *and*
- If Lopez **wins** gold ... (= cause), he has said that he will retire ... (= effect)

C

We use **be about to + infinitive** mainly in conversation to say that something will (not) happen in the very near future:

- We're **about to eat**. Do you want to join us?
- Appearing on TV might make her famous, but it's **not about to make** her rich.
- A: Why don't you switch it off and turn it back on again?
B: Yes, I **was about to try** that when you came in.
(not Yes, I was to try ...) (referring to the future from the past)



Exercises

12.1 Complete these news extracts using the verbs in brackets. Use **be to + infinitive** if possible and **will + infinitive** if not. Use active or passive forms as necessary. **A**

- Jon Stobbard has written his first new play for 15 years. Its first performance (stage) at the New Victoria Theatre.
- The new safety system (stop) trains automatically if they pass a danger signal.
- Stafford Boys' School (merge) with the nearby Bicton Girls' School to form a new co-educational establishment.
- There are fears that sea levels (rise) catastrophically in the next 50 years.
- The old design and technology programme (replace) with a new computer science course.

Now use the verbs in the box to do the same in 6 to 10.

become create increase receive retire succeed

- Managing Director Lars Lindberg, 59, this summer a year early. He by Christina Fontana, who joined the company last year.
- As the temperatures fall with the onset of winter, the refugee crisis more severe.
- Production line staff at the Heathcote garden furniture factory in Northam a pay rise following a big new order from Italy.
- Seventy new posts at the factory following a major investment by the parent company in the United States.
- The recent rapid rise in house prices in the south-east the demand for higher salaries among lower-paid workers.

12.2 Underline the correct answers. In some cases both alternatives are possible. **B & C**

- You need to work much harder if you *have / are to have* any chance of passing the exam.
- My sister *is to start / is about to start* a PhD in Physics.
- Mrs Patel is likely to become the Foreign Minister if the party *wins / is to win* power at the next election.
- If you *enjoy / are to enjoy* romantic comedies, then this is a film you must see.
- A: Can you type this letter for me?
B: Sorry, I'm *just to go / 'm just about to go* home. It'll have to wait until tomorrow.
- If Beckman *recovers / is to recover* from a foot injury, it seems certain that he will play in Saturday's match against Spain.
- If the university *keeps / is to keep* its international reputation, it must first invest in better facilities for students.
- Jonas Fischer has denied that he *is to resign / is about to resign* as marketing manager.
- It started snowing an hour ago, and from the look of those clouds things *are to get / are about to get* a lot worse.
- If the railway system *is improved / is to be improved*, the government should invest substantial amounts of money now.

