Future in the past
was going to or *would*? *knew* or *thought*?

be going to or *will*?

Generally, we can apply the basic principle for *be going to* and *will* to the past and future in the past. For a more thorough description of the difference between these two lexicals, see the article "*Will* or *be going to*?"

be going to: The prediction is based on present reality; it is the future fulfillment of something in the present. "*Going to* often emphasizes the idea of a decision that has already been made." (*Practical English Usage*, Swan) Note that it *emphasizes*.

- the future of a present plan (*When are you going to get married?*)
- the future of a present sign or cause (*It's going to rain.*) (In this case, the sign/cause is cloudy skies.)

will : simple statement about the future as a piece of information. It's used "to give (or ask for) information about the future, in cases where there is no reason to use a present progressive or *going to*." (*Practical English Usage*, Swan)

was going to or *would*?

In many situations, but not always, we can use either *was going to* or *would*. It depends on which features (e.g., based on reality at that time versus simple statement of information) the speaker is focusing on. Certain situations, however, logically require one and not the other. See the two sections "When we use only…" below.

There is usually no *conscious* decision to use *will* or *be going to*. When I say "I'll go tomorrow," I don't think to myself, "I'm stating simply as a piece of information," and the listener doesn't think, "He's not thinking of going as the future of a present plan." In fact, though, if you were to study samples of actual utterances by native speakers, you would see that that's how they work. For example, if I ask, "When are you going to the States?" I am assuming *sub*consciously that the listener has a plan. The fact that the decision is usually made subconsciously means that true mastery of *will* and *be going to* comes only with lots of exposure to educated native speech and writing.

When we use only *would*: Unrealized (*or* unreal) present / future

- Thank you for offering. I *would* (~~am going to~~) accept your offer, but I don't want to put you to any trouble.
- I *would* (~~am going to~~) give you a quiz today, but I'm afraid I'd get strangled if I did.

When we use only *was going to*: The unrealized past

We never use *would* without *have done* when we are talking about the unrealized past (including unrealized past intentions). We use *was going to*:

- David *was going to* (~~would~~) do the whole story on the hospital, but Marsha stopped him.
- I was going to (~~would~~) give you a quiz today, but I'm afraid I'll get strangled if I do.

In order to use *would*, we would have to use *have -en* with it:

- David *would have done* the whole story on the hospital, but Marsha stopped him [*or*: …on the hospital if Marsha hadn't stopped him].

Future in the past

Consider the rules for using *will*/*would* and *be*/*was going to*. Those rules also apply when we want to express future in the past.

- I thought that no one *would / was going to* come to class today, but all of you came!
  Use *was going* to if there is evidence or agreement. Use *would* if it is a simple prediction.
- Marsha was worried that she *would / was going to* lose her job because she didn't interview Prof. Daniels.
  The underlying idea: "I *will / am going to* lose my job because I didn't interview Prof. Daniels."
- Marsha worried that she *would* lose her job if she missed another interview.
  The underlying idea: "If I miss another interview I will / am going to lose my job."
- David came in to Margaret's office. He wasn't in a very good mood. He seemed worried about something. And he was in a big hurry to see Mr. Russo. I think that David *was going to* tell Bob about everything and the details about Marsha and himself.
  David was planning to tell Bob even before he entered Bob's office. *Would* would be wrong here. Also, *would* changes the meaning from unrealized past to unreal future.

Which (*was going to* or *would*) would you use in each of these sentences expressing future in the past? (Find the answers at the end of this article.)

1. I _____ give you a quiz today, but the copy shop was closed.
2. I thought that no one _____ come to class today, but all of you came!
3. If I had known that the bus _____ break down, I would not have taken the bus.

knew or *thought*?

Many learners say "I knew…" when they should say "I thought…" One student, for example, was surprised when the teacher gave the class a quiz, and incorrectly said, "I knew we weren't going to have a quiz today!"

Why is this a problem? 'Know' is used only when the expectation turns out to be correct. The student's expectation was wrong, so he should have said 'thought' instead of 'knew': "I thought we weren't going to have a quiz today." The student could also have used the negative form of 'know': "I didn't know we were going to have a quiz today."

In which of these sentences can we use a form of 'know'? (All of the sentences are said *in class*. Mr. MacStein is there.)

1. Partner, I _____ that you would come to class today.
2. Partner, I _____ that you wouldn't come to class today.
3. Partner, you told me yesterday that you weren't going to come to class today, but I _____ you would come because I know you better than you know yourself.
4. I _____ Mr. MacStein would be sick today.
5. I _____ Mr. MacStein would come to class today.
6. (This one's tricky!) I don't like this class activity. If I had _____ that we were going to do this activity today, I would have stayed home.

Answers

was going to or *would*?

1. *was going to*. The intended focus is very clear in the context of the sentence. Also, this is an unrealized past intention; see "When we use only *was going to*."
2. *Would* if not focusing on evidence or agreement; *was going to* if evidence or agreement
3. *Would* if not focusing on evidence; *was going to* if focusing on evidence

knew or *thought*?

In which of these sentences can we use a form of 'know'? (In all of these sentences, in the *think* or *know* clause we can use either *would* or *was going to*.)

1. Partner, I knew that you would come to class today. *or*: I didn't think that you would come to class…
2. Partner, I didn't think you would come to class today. OR I thought that you wouldn't…
3. Partner, you told me yesterday that you weren't going to come to class today, but I knew you would come because I know you better than you know yourself. (*Thought* is also possible if he wasn't sure at the time of prediction.)
4. I thought Mr. MacStein would be sick today.
5. I knew Mr. MacStein would come to class today.
6. If I had known that we were going to do this activity today, I would have stayed home. (The past unreal conditional pattern expresses the opposite of what actually happened. <u>The reality</u>: He was wrong, which means that he actually *didn't* know. <u>The opposite of the reality</u>: He knew.)