

Word for Word

Shall we talk about using *will* and *shall* in scientific writing?



Both *will* and *shall* are helping verbs used to express futurity in American English, but only *will* is used in scientific writing.

In formal writing, *shall* was once used with first-person pronouns to express the writer's belief that a future action or state is likely or inevitable, whereas *will* was used with these pronouns to express the writer's willingness or consent to do something. (Only *will* was used with all second- and third-person nouns, regardless of the intent of expression.)¹⁻³

Examples:

We shall dine in Paris tomorrow evening.

We will dine in Paris tomorrow evening.

Will and *shall* are considered to be practically interchangeable nowadays, and *will* has become almost universally favored. (Decades ago, grammarians were already writing that "*will* has edged out *shall* as the people's choice."⁴) *Shall* still appears in the occasional legal document (though *must* is often preferred⁵), but its use otherwise is

generally limited to posing polite first-person questions that make suggestions or request information.

Examples:

Shall we dine in Paris tomorrow evening?

What shall we eat when we get there?

With *will* now doing much of the work *shall* once did, it is both appropriate and preferred to use *will* exclusively in formal writing, including scientific writing.

Example:

We will confirm these findings in future studies.

References

1. Strunk W and White EB. *The Elements of Style*. 4th edition. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon. 2000. p 58.
2. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shall>
3. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/will>
4. O'Connor PT. *Woe is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books. 1996. pp 188-189.
5. <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/conversational/shall-and-must/>

— Joe Munch

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