Foresight

English

1. Futures definition

Foresight is a field that involves the systematic exploration and analysis of possible futures to better prepare for change. The field is based on a plurality of practices and approaches, informed by research, and aims to create a better understanding of where a particular system under consideration stands to inform decision-making, alongside the possibility of tracing the most effective path towards an organisation's preferred future. Organisations use foresight to identify trends, opportunities, challenges, risks, disruptions, and shifts that may arise over the coming years.

2. General definitions

No single and generally accepted definition of foresight existed when this glossary entry was written. In our research, we found more than forty different definitions, which categorize foresight respectively as a discipline, a practice, a process, an approach, an ability, a capacity, a framework, or a field. In order to encompass this variety of other definitions, our futures definition uses a broad preliminary definition of foresight: a field with a plurality of practices and approaches, informed by research.

Early definitions in the field of foresight refer only to the singular form of the word *future* rather than the plural, *futures*. Furthermore, consistent with the etymology of the term, foresight reports have traditionally been illustrated with flashlights, beam lights, radars, or crow's nests on ships, relating to the idea of seeing further ahead or seeing more than what is immediately apparent.

Terms that are often used together with foresight, especially in older definitions in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, are: *strategic, systematic, understand, analyse, plan, prepare, technology, methods, tools, experts, and forecasts*. Early use of foresight in the military and in competitive corporate contexts has left a clear mark on the field, leading to variations on a persistent Western definition: "Strategic foresight is a structured and systematic approach of exploring plausible futures to anticipate and better prepare for change" (OECD, 2019). Likewise, for Gotseva, corporate foresight "is loosely understood as a set of practices, methods, tools, and techniques that help firms explore, shape and manage their futures by enabling organizations to detect early signals and

understand key drivers of change, interpret their implications, and inform future courses of action to ensure the long-term survival and success of the company" (2024).

Over recent years, the use of additional terms in the field has broadened the definitions of foresight. The term *participation* is gaining in importance, as are *uncertainty*, *anticipation*, *and emergence*. However, these terms do not seem to reflect a definitional consensus or a shared domain of understanding in the field yet. Additionally, definitions of foresight tend to diverge most when it comes to the purposes for which the relevant practices and approaches are used. For example, according to Foresight Canada, foresight is a "systematic, participatory and multi-disciplinary approach to explore mid- to long-term futures and drivers of change" (Forward Thinking Platform, 2014), while the UN Strategic Foresight Guide sees foresight as "an approach for systematically thinking and acting in a long-term and anticipatory way under conditions of uncertainty" (UN Futures Lab, 2023). Meanwhile, the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI), part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), sees strategic foresight as an "established practice of an organisation to constantly perceive, make sense of, and act upon the future as it emerges in the present" (2024). Ultimately, whether foresight is used to understand the present, to get ahead of competition, to chart a desirable path forward, or to influence a preferred future, all uses of foresight as currently practised seem to refer to the required methods and tools, as well as to the need for some kind of institutional or organisational process, in order to lead to relevant decision(s) about actions in the present and near future.

A different interpretation of foresight as an individual cognitive act of *foreseeing* comes from Maree Conway, who defines the term as the "innate neurological and cognitive human capacity to think about – to perceive – futures images in the present" (personal communication, 5 July 2025). Conway's definition appears to lie at the intersections of the human property of anticipation, the ability of imagination, and the competence of Futures Literacy.

3. Etymology

The term foresight comes from fourteenth-century Middle English *forsight* or *forsyght*, formed from the Germanic prefix *fore-* (before or ahead) and *sight* (vision). Similarly, the related English term, *providence*, comes from the Latin *providentia*, which comes from *pro-* (ahead) and *videre* (to see), meaning "prevision, foresight" (Wiktionary English, n.d.). These two origins highlight that, from the beginning, foresight has denoted "seeing ahead" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.).

In the French tradition, *prospective* is a term that is equivalent to foresight. The term is borrowed from the Late Latin *prospectivus*, deriving from *prospicere* (to look ahead, into the distance), meaning from where one can see far away, offering a *perspective* (Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (CNRTL), n.d.).

In the 15th century, *prospective* in French mainly designated a science of optics and visual perspective, with no connection to anticipation or *prediction*. By the mid-15th century, however, prospective already referred to a 'faculty of foresight' to describe an intellectual capacity for foreseeing the future, as attested in François Villon's Lais (Petit Testament, 1456), a text later widely circulated in print during the Renaissance. Prospective's modern usage was reinvented by Gaston Berger, when he popularised the usage of the term to designate a forward-looking approach in future studies (Berger, 1957). This novel usage was established by analogy with *retrospective,* looking towards the past. In his work, Berger emphasises that prospective is first and foremost an attitude, marking its fundamentally future-oriented focus.

4. Field of terms

Differing significantly from foresight, *forecasting* is "a method of predicting a future event or condition by analysing patterns and uncovering trends in previous and current data" (Caballar & Stryker, n.d.). A common example of forecasting is a weather forecast, which uses historical and current weather data to predict future conditions. While forecasting generally projects one probable future based on quantitative data, foresight systematically explores multiple plausible and possible futures, often qualitative, to identify potentially disruptive changes and inform strategic choice, rather than arriving at a single possible outcome.

Similarly, a *prediction* is a statement about a future event or outcome, often informed by existing knowledge, trends, or data. In general usage, a prediction is what someone expects will happen in the future (e.g. economic growth, election results) based on available evidence (Wikipedia English, n.d.). Foresight, on the other hand, explicitly avoids the claim of knowing what will happen. Given the Latin etymology of prediction from the root *praedicere*, which comes from *prae-* (before) and *dicere* (to say), the act of prediction emphasises saying or formulating ahead in time rather than asserting certainty about a single possible future.

Precognition is a claimed psychic ability to predict or perceive future events without solely or completely relying on the five senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell. In psychology and parapsychology, precognition is defined as "supernormal knowledge of future events" and is considered a form of extrasensory perception (ESP). The futures field does not work with psychic abilities (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-b).

Prospection in cognitive sciences and psychology refers to "the mental representation and evaluation of possible futures. It may include planning, prediction, hypothetical scenarios, daydreaming" and more (University of Pennsylvania, 2018). Relatedly, foresight is the formalised and systematic application of the inherent human capacity of prospection at the organizational or systemic level to inform decision-making.

This glossary interprets *anticipation* as a property of a system that can consider something before it may occur in natural time. By actively harnessing and developing not just the act of *anticipation,* but also *anticipatory systems and processes (ASP),* via the use of a variety of tools and methods in order to

systematically explore multiple possible futures, foresight extends the engagement between the present and the future. This harnessing of anticipation and ASP influences and guides perception, meaning-making, and action in the present via the use of imagination, internal models, and assumptions about possible future states, including final causes (or explanations) in the Aristotelian sense, which link the development of a system under consideration with the system's inherent purposes. Through anticipation, futures-oriented representations of a system, along with its environment and internal state, can act as causal factors in present behaviour. In other words, engagement with ideas about the future can influence the present via anticipation.

Futures Studies is the study of anticipatory systems and processes (ASP), which are the ways in which humans imagine, interpret, and use knowledge of possible futures to inform understanding, planning, and decision-making in the present (Miller et al., 2022). *Futures Literacy* is the competence that depends on the ability to acquire an understanding of anticipatory systems and processes (Bergheim, 2024).

Futuring "is a systemic and creative process that helps us explore, analyze, and ultimately, design for… the future. Equal parts artistry and analysis, futuring helps us identify the societal and behavioral shifts that are likely to unfold over the coming years, and identify strategies we can adopt today to influence that future for good" (Carey, 2024).

In art history, *Futurism* was an early 20th-century Italian art movement that celebrated technology, speed, and dynamic change. More generally, the term can also refer to an outlook focused on future innovation and progress (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-a)

While the theory of anticipation engages with complexity, the term *complexity* does not appear in any of the definitions of foresight we found. As Poli notes in *Introduction to Anticipation Studies*, "as practiced, foresight usually shows a limited acceptance of complexity" (2017), which suggests that much of applied foresight still struggles to fully integrate complex, non-linear, adaptive, and emergent dynamics into its approaches.

5. Theoretical foundations

A recurring debate in the futures field concerns the existence of a coherent theoretical backbone for foresight, with numerous definitions and practices coexisting without forming a single, unified discipline (Piirainen & Gonzalez, 2015). Godet even refers to foresight as "an indiscipline" (Godet, 1991), indicating a lack of adherence to rules or norms, which allows him to question whether a theory of foresight, in the strict disciplinary sense, is either possible or even desirable. In the French intellectual tradition, Foucault's critique of academic disciplinarity in *Discipline and Punish* is instructive here: disciplines classify, normalise, and distribute individuals along a scale of conformity, qualifying some knowledges and practices while disqualifying or invalidating others (Foucault, 1975/1977). In that vein, any attempt to "discipline" foresight risks domesticating a practice that precisely aims at opening up possibilities rather than normalising the field.

A second critical lineage of debate about foresight runs through post-structural and decolonial futures studies. Sardar, in his seminal essay “Colonizing the future: the 'other' dimension of futures studies,” argues that Western foresight practice tends to universalise a specific image of progress, time, and rationality, and in doing so colonises the futures of others (Sardar, 1993). More recently, authors working on decolonial and pluriversal futures, such as Krishnan, insist that foresight must explicitly surface and deconstruct its own foundational assumptions, lest it reproduce colonial, gendered, or extractive biases under the guise of a neutral method (2022).

The French tradition of foresight relies notably on Gaston Berger, who framed prospective as a reflective and methodological approach to thinking about the future. Drawing from a philosophical reflection on time, human intentionality, and ethical responsibility, Berger’s work introduces a structured corpus of concepts, methods, and tools for exploring possible futures and guiding present decisions through foresight. The French tradition of prospective focuses more on the participatory dimension, as well as its utility to enlighten present action, the regained sense of agency that results from it, and creative potential. For example, Berger says foresight requires seeing far, wide, and deep (Berger, 1959). Godet adds that foresight involves three characteristics: to see differently, to see collectively, and to use methods which are as rigorous and participatory as possible (Godet, 2006, p. 2).

6. Use in practice

In practice, approaches from the field of foresight are mainly used by large corporations, the military, think tanks, and governments, but are increasingly used in other entities, organizations, and settings, as well. Today, foresight practices tend to converge towards hybrid approaches, blending qualitative and quantitative methods, collective insights, and ethical considerations.

Additionally, foresight approaches are increasingly used within sustainability and ecological transition debates, and augment critical and transformative futures efforts, especially those which emphasise agency, justice, and systemic change rather than those which prioritize prediction or control.

Terminologists: Chloé Momas and Stefan Bergheim

This English text is the original entry for this term. LLMs have only been used for research purposes. The published entry was written by the human terminologists, who assume full responsibility for its quality.

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