

Feeling Comfortable with Verb Tenses

No. 50 in the Writing Center Handout Series

The crux of a sentence is the action it describes, indicated by a verb. Verb tense connects the kind of action (e.g. to run) or existence (e.g. to seem) to its relationship with time (ran, run, will run, or seemed, seems, will seem, etc.). Using proper and consistent tenses strengthens a paper and make its ideas more cohesive. Refer to both sides of this handout for tips on choosing and using verb tenses.

Choosing a tense

Although no overarching rule dictates which tense to use in a particular piece of writing, some general guidelines help determine when to use which tenses.

Use present tense when the world is contained between the front and back covers of a book. Any time you open a novel, what's on the page is happening. Because the plot of a novel or the argument of an article never changes, the author always *writes*, the characters always *do*, and the text always *means* something.

Example: Maggie appears to play the coquette at times; she manipulates the emotions of the men in her life, seemingly in rejection of the oppressive, patriarchal life they each represent.

Even though Maggie manipulates these men at different times, we read the novel as she manipulates each character. Because we see the process of these events, present tense is appropriate.

Example: A author Salman Rushdie explores ideas of partition and identity through Saleem's narration in Midnight's Children. It's tempting to think that Rushdie explored these ideas, since he finished writing the book and the essay writer finished reading it. But each time someone opens Midnight's Children, Rushdie explores these themes yet again.

Use past tense when historical reality is essential to the paper. History happened. When writing about historical events, past tense is often the most appropriate.

Example: Before this federal proposal, twenty-two states had enacted laws requiring a minor seeking an abortion to either notify a parent of her intent, or to gain the consent of a parent or judge prior to having an abortion.

The historical facts surrounding the federal proposal have all already happened; the tense should indicate that they are now in the past.

Past tense may also be appropriate if the assignment requires you to reflect on your own experience in relation to the book.

Example: Researching my genealogy was more difficult than A mo's guide led me to believe.

The writer is not simply reviewing the guide. Instead, she is reflecting on her experience with the book, which happened in the past.

Also use past tense when discussing events that happened before the beginning of a work.

Example: When Pierce Inverarity died, he left Oedipa in charge of his estate for unclear reasons.

When *The Crying of Lot 49* opens, Pierce has already died. Because we never read about his death as it happens, it remains in the past tense.

Use future tense when you must make predictions, as is often necessary in a lab report, a study, or a paper pondering the events after the last page of a story.

Example: Future experiments will look for motor activity in homologous muscles of the pregenital abdominal segments of both sexes. These experiments have not yet taken place, so the author makes it clear that when they occur, they will have certain goals.

When determining which tense to use, keep in mind that the governing principle for verb tense is consistency. The reverse side of this handout includes pointers for using verb tenses consistently and for checking the use of verb tense in the revision stages.

(continued on reverse)

For more information on writing research papers, see

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed), 625-33.

<http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/writcent/hypergrammar/usetense.html>

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/handbook.html>

http://chm.gmu.edu/courses/western/civ/writing/advice/advice_grammar.html



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Here are some of the "how-to's" of using verb tenses.

Being consistent More important than remembering the "correct" tense for a particular kind of paper is remembering to use the chosen tense consistently. The logic of an argument depends on the logic of syntax, so even if you're uncertain of the appropriateness of a particular tense, if you're consistent, readers will be able to follow your train of thought.

With one tense In literature, even if one scene happens long after another, discuss both in present tense.

Example (inconsistent): *The other men thought Yossarian was crazy because he no longer wanted to wear his uniform. Yossarian, however, is perhaps the sanest member of the group.*

Was Yossarian sane when the other men thought he was crazy? The difference in tenses separates these two ideas, leaving a gap in time and therefore in information.

Example (consistent): *The other men think Yossarian is crazy because he no longer wants to wear his uniform. Yossarian, however, is perhaps the sanest member of the group.*

Present tense in both sentences indicates that Yossarian is sane *while* the other men think he is crazy.

With multiple tenses Sometimes a paper requires reference to past or future events while discussing a subject in the present. The key to maintaining consistency in these cases is to return to one tense as the point of reference.

Example: *Written and spoken evidence supported the idea that American colonists and the citizens of Great Britain held similar views on the importance of liberty and governmental representation.*

If the writer means that evidence in Colonial times supported those views, this consistent past tense is fine. If, however, evidence *still* supports those ideas, the verb tense should indicate that.

Example: *Written and spoken evidence supports the idea that American colonists and the citizens of Great Britain held similar views on the importance of liberty and governmental representation.*

In this version, the colonists and citizens are still part of history (past tense), but the evidence discussed is relevant today (present tense).

Checking for consistency Awkward syntax may tempt you to forego consistency in verb tense. The following elements of a paper are good places to spot check for tense confusion:

- **Passive voice.** Inverting subject and verb can be confusing. When you notice passive voice in your own work, double check that the helping verb is in the tense you intend to use. (See *The St. Martin's Handbook* pp. 632-33 for information on passive voice.)

Example: *Her application is/ was being processed.*

The meaning of the sentence depends on the tense of "to be."

- **Quoting the text.** The quote you want to use may not be in the same tense as your paper, but make sure to introduce the quote in the tense in which you are writing.

Example: *These material earnings are not what she genuinely desires. The narrator ultimately claims, "Her success excited, dated, and then bored her...the poor woman herself was yawning in spirit" (503).*

Even though the quote is in the past tense, the phrase leading into it is consistent in tense (present) with previous sentences. This logic helps for the same reason that present tense is always used to discuss literary works; the narrator *claims*, just as this character *desires*.

- **Discussing the world outside the text.** Reflecting on the text or discussing events that happened before the opening or will happen after the end require mixed tenses, which can be confusing. Double check that you discuss events in these categories in their appropriate time frame.

Example: *I wonder how many of these sources Smiley used in order to give her story more authenticity.*

We are with the essay-writers, wondering in the present not about Smiley's text but the process Smiley used to write it. In other words, we are in the present wondering about something that already happened.

If you're still uncomfortable with verb tenses, you may want to review definitions of each tense (see other side for sources). Then you'll have an easier time selecting the forms of verbs that allow you to be consistent and therefore clear in your writing.



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