

Don't Know Much about Verb Tense?

Amy Cameron

No matter the discipline, correct verb tense is a necessity. We might have learned verb tenses in the past, but here's a refresher on a few tenses. Do you remember them?

Let's first take a look at simple present...

The simple present usually describes an action that is repeated regularly. It is used to give a universal truth. (In conversations, simple present can describe actions happening in the future.)

- Everyday my alarm *rings* to wake me up.
- Water boils at boils at 100° C.
- The basketball game *begins* in an hour.

Simple Past Tense

The simple past tense signals that an action occurred or a situation existed in the past.

- The mail truck *dropped* off a package this morning.
- They *jumped* rope during recess.

Present, Past Progressive Tenses (to be + present participle)

The progressive tenses emphasize ongoing action. Often, it is used for an action in progress when another action occurs, or to emphasize a future action.

- Sam *is attending* Clarkson University.
- Sierra *was studying* for her math test when the fire alarm went off.
- *When* the waitress *was giving* the soup to the customer, she accidentally spilled
- Next week, we *are leaving* Potsdam and *are going* somewhere warmer. (Note the time signal, "next week.")

Present Perfect Tense (have + past participle)

Use the present perfect tense for recently completed actions or actions that began in the past and continue at the present moment.

- Our friend Mona *has just arrived* from the airport.
- Ever since we met, Jack *has loved* to ski. (Implies Jack still does.)

Past Perfect Tense

The past perfect tense is used to indicate a past event that occurred before another past event.

The past perfect is especially useful to describe actions not in chronological order.

- Because we weren't prepared, our professor didn't give us the exam that he *had prepared* last week.
- He had a terrible cough for a week, although he *had quit* smoking long ago.

To review of all tenses, moods and voice, visit the Writing Center or try

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/601/1/> and <http://www.clarkson.edu/writingcenter/errors.html>

Tenses in Science, Engineering and HU/SS

Now that we've gone over the tenses are we done yet? Nope.

Writers need to be aware of their choice and consistency of tenses. Often the choice of tense depends on the discipline!

Verb tenses must be logical & fit the expectations of the reader, whether professor, fellow majors or journal editor. Science, engineering and humanities have different conventions for verb tenses.

In lab reports and technical articles, the tenses change from section to section. The Method can be described as a past action in past tense.

Three tubes containing 10mL of the buffer **were spun** in the centrifuge for 30 seconds.

The data found can also be described in the Results section using the past tense.

The normality test **revealed** sand sample #1 **followed** normal distribution ($p=0.459$).

However, like narrating a game play-by-play, we can use the present tense when describing results in a figure or table and when discussing the significance of the results.

As seen in Table 1, the charges **increase** as the power supply increases.

The same use of present tense holds for ideas and events that appear in texts, such as literature, political theory, etc. The writer can choose to discuss the authors' points in present as if the reader and writer are viewing the text at that moment. The other choice is to treat the ideas and events in the text historically, using past tenses.

The main character Ragged Dick, in the novel by Horatio Alger, **works** hard and **tries** to make a name for him.

The main character Ragged Dick, in the novel by Horatio Alger, **worked** hard and **tried** to make a name for him.

- Finally, writers use present tenses for general truths:

Greening up universities and buildings in the future **is** important because we all **leave** a large carbon footprint and **are affecting** our environment in a negative way.

Problem: Inconsistent Tenses

Verb tenses orient the reader in time. Inconsistent, or illogical, tenses annoy and/or confuse readers. One cause is the writer's shifting position in time. One solution is for the writer to imagine him/herself on a point in a timeline. Returning imaginatively to that reference point will remind the writer of the timeframe.

- For example, past tenses (bolded) are appropriate for last summer's events described below. The present verbs (*italics*) are inconsistent with the context.

Last summer, I **worked** at a local university in making it greener. Our efforts **involve** assessing how to make the buildings more energy efficient. We *work* more hours than we **had anticipated**, but the experience *is* positive and **has stayed** with me since then.

- In the definition below from a lab report introduction, the writer uses inconsistent tenses.

Distillation **is** a process which *used* solvents to purify a substance that **contains** a volatile component. The goal of distillation **is** to separate the volatile component from a compound and obtain a distillate that *was* pure. Simple distillation *used* the difference in boiling points of the two substances. This difference in boiling points **makes** it possible to boil out of a compound while the other *remained* in the flask. Typically, the solvents **are** more volatile than the compound. In the distillation process, solvents typically **leave** the distillation column.

- In the definition below from a lab report introduction (not the procedure), the writer consistently uses present verb tense throughout. (Present tense is used for general truths and recurring actions.)

Distillation **is** a process which **uses** solvents to purify a substance that **contains** a volatile component. The goal of distillation **is** to separate the volatile component from a compound and obtain a distillate that is pure. Simple distillation **uses** the difference in boiling points of the two substances. This difference in boiling points **makes** it possible to boil out of a compound while the other **remains** in the flask. Typically, the solvents **are** more volatile than the compound. In the distillation process, solvents typically **leave** the distillation column.

- Here is another passage using consistent tenses. The writer chose to discuss Socrates in the present tense:

As Socrates **suggests**: “The whole of which rhetoric is a part is not an art at all” (Gorgias, 19). He **believes** art **aims** at the good; however art **is** false in the fact that it **gains** the pleasant by ignoring the good. Since rhetoric only **gives** a part truth, it **creates** a false impression to the audience.

- Here is the same passage discussing Socrates. The writer chose to use the past tense. Note the consistency of the tense.

As Socrates **suggested**: “The whole of which rhetoric is a part is not an art at all” (Gorgias, 19). He **believed** art **aimed** at the good; however art **was** false in the fact that it **gained** the pleasant by ignoring the good. Since rhetoric only **gave** a part truth, it **created** a false impression to the audience.

But realistically....

Except for a simple procedure, definition or chronological tale, writers rarely use verbs in one tense. In narrating a story or describe a process, the writer will use a sequence of tenses to describe multiple events that may be chronological, simultaneous (or conditional). The following passage uses a logical **sequence of tenses**:

- Remember the paragraph about greening a campus? The complete, corrected paragraph with a logical sequence of tenses including past, present (for a general truth) and future follows:

Last summer, I **worked** at a local university in making it greener. Our efforts **involved** assessing how to make the buildings more energy efficient. We **worked** more hours than we **had anticipated**, but the experience **was** positive and **has stayed** with me since then. Greening up universities and buildings for the future **was** important to us *then* because we **knew** that all buildings **leave** a large carbon footprint and **affect** our environment in a negative way. However, next year's students **will feel** the positive effects of making buildings more energy efficient.

- Remember the definition of distillation? Here it is from the Method section. Note the sequence of tenses.

As defined in the introduction, distillation **is** a process which **uses** solvents to purify a substance that **contains** a volatile component. The goal of this lab **was** to separate the volatile component (yyy) from (xxx) and obtain a distillate that **was** pure. When (yyy) reached its boiling point, it boiled out of the column while the pure (xxx) **remained** in the flask.

Quick Tips

- ✓ In any project, keep the tense logical and consistent. Don't irritate or confuse the reader.
- ✓ Check if the project's tenses match the context.
- ✓ If uncertain, use a time signal to help you choose a tense.
- ✓ Notice the verb tense conventions in your discipline.
- ✓ In experimental reports, the abstract can be in the present or past tense. Materials and Methods sections use the past tense. Tables and figures can be discussed in the present.
- ✓ For HU/SS literature analyses, choose a present or past time frame and be consistent.
- ✓ Process descriptions, analyses, and arguments use multiple tenses.