



# Center for Writing and Speaking

## S NO. 6 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Verb Tenses

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 makes 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. 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: *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, 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 in the past.  
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 is to reflect on your own experience in relation to the book.  
Example: *Researching my genealogy was more difficult than Arno'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 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.*

(continued on reverse)

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## Feeling Comfortable with Verb Tenses, Continued

### Be consistent.

More important than remembering the “correct” tense for a particular kind of paper is remembering to use the chosen tense consistently. 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).

### Check for consistency.

- With 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.

*Example*: *Her application is/was being processed.* The meaning of the sentence depends on the tense of “to be.”

- When quoting the text: The quotation you want to use may not be in the same tense as your paper, but make sure to introduce the quotation 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, elated, and then bored her...the poor woman herself was yawning in spirit” (503).* Even though the quotation is in the past tense, the phrase leading into it is consistent in tense 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.

- When 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.