

Consistency of Verb Tense

Introduction

Verb tense is used to indicate a time frame to the reader.

Consider the following examples.

The teacher **will mark** the essays.
(The marking will take place in the future.)

The teacher **has marked** the essays.
The marking took place in the past and has been completed

The teacher **is marking** the essays.
The marking is taking place in the present

Problems occur when writers change tenses inappropriately within sentences, paragraphs, or complete works.

Sentences

Tenses within a sentence should be changed when there is a logical reason to do so.

When tenses stay the same

Look at the following sentences that unnecessarily use two different tenses and think about how they should be altered.

When she **writes** an essay she **will plan** carefully. **X**
(When she **writes** an essay she **plans** carefully. **✓**)

Because he **didn't understand** the question he **leaves** it out. **X**
(Because he **didn't understand** the question he **left** it out. **✓**)

The students **liked** that teacher before he **fails** them. **X**
(The students **liked** that teacher before he **failed** them. **✓**)

In these sentences it makes no sense to shift between tenses. If you do so, you will confuse the reader.

When tenses are different

Look at each of the following sentences and think about why it makes sense to use two different tenses within the one sentence.

My essay **contains** quotations that I **found** in a journal.
(The essay currently contains the quotations and the quotations were found in the past.)

We **will develop** a new version of the program because our client is **suggesting** several changes.
(A new version will be developed in the future because the client is currently suggesting changes.)

Newton **proved** that white light **is** a mixture of the colours of the rainbow.
(Newton proved this in the past and it is still true now that white light is a mixture of colours of the rainbow.)

Paragraphs and complete works

A paragraph or complete work should have one basic tense with shifts to other tenses to indicate a change in time frame to the reader. Your basic tense will probably be past, present, or future.

Past

If you are writing about past events or if you are discussing completed studies or findings or arguments given in scientific literature, your basic tense throughout your work should be past tense. Study the following paragraph and you will see that the basic tense is past and that it inappropriately shifts to future and present tense.

I **watched** (past tense) the small children with their mother as they **threw** (past tense) bread to the ducks. The ducks **catch** (X inappropriate present tense) the bread in their beaks. The children **cheered** (past tense) loudly. This **made** (past tense) me happy and I **smiled** (past tense). I **will go** (X inappropriate future tense) home happy. When I **went** (past tense) home I **wrote** (past tense) a simple poem about my day.

Present

If you are writing about facts or your own ideas or if you are describing what happens in a particular book or movie, use the present tense. Study the following paragraph and you will see that the basic tense is present and that it inappropriately shifts to past and future tense.

In Smith's new book "Dragon" the theme of driving ambition **is** (present tense) important. The main character, Big John, **takes** (present tense) the prophecy of his friend, Jacko, seriously and **develops** (present tense) a dreadful plan which **leads** (present tense) to death and misery. He **believed** (X inappropriate past tense) the plan was foolproof but he **is** (present tense) wrong. He **will encounter** (X inappropriate future tense) many obstacles on his journey. At first Big John **believes** (present tense) his plan **is** (present tense) working but he **was** (X inappropriate past tense) wrong. This book **is** (present tense) not up to Smith's usual standard.

Future

If you are reflecting on what will happen in the future, use future tense. Study the following paragraph and you will see that the basic tense is future and that it inappropriately shifts to present and past tense.

I **will take** (future tense) a train to Sydney and then a bus to Parkes. It **will be** (future tense) great. I **will write** (future tense) to you later and **will give** (will give) you all the details of the trip. No doubt I **enjoy** (X inappropriate present tense) the food on the train. I **will visit** (future tense) Mary and Tom Brown after the conference. They **liked** (X inappropriate past tense) a visit. I **will see** (future tense) you on my return!

Tense Changes

Just as tense change is sometimes justified within sentences, so too tense change is sometimes justified in paragraphs and complete works. The basic rule is to change tense only when necessary. Study the following paragraph carefully and you will see that the basic tense is past but that tense shifts appropriately to past and future.

Our researchers **found** (appropriate past tense) that most people who **used** (appropriate past tense) the system **liked** (appropriate past

tense) it. Most **said** (appropriate past tense) that they particularly **liked** (appropriate past tense) the sound effects. However, some people **mentioned** (appropriate past tense) that they **found** (appropriate past tense) the text too small. We **will be making** (appropriate future tense) the text one size larger. Hopefully, this **will satisfy** (appropriate future tense) the users. Although we **conducted** (appropriate past tense) our study at a very busy time of year, we **found** (appropriate past tense) that many people **gave up** (appropriate past tense) an hour of their time for this study. We **are grateful** (appropriate present tense) to them all.

Consistency of Verb Tense Quiz

In each of the following paragraphs there is one word used in the wrong tense. Replace the word with the required word.

A request for more help came from aid workers this morning. We will therefore be sending more food and had need to see if they also require medical help.

As of now, we were quite hopeful that the situation will improve.

The clients stopped in front of each design, studied each one, and then take notes.

He will take the photos, develop them, and would then deliver them.

Answers

A request for more help came from aid workers this morning. We will therefore be sending more food and **will** need to see if they also require medical help.

(The future is currently being spoken about.)

As of now, we **are** quite hopeful that the situation will improve.

(We are hopeful now.)

The clients stopped in front of each design, studied each one, and then **took** notes.

(Everything should be in the past tense here.)

He will take the photos, develop them, and **will** then deliver them.
(This is all in the future.)