



Verbs

Shifts in verb tense can be challenging errors to find, since they often *sound* fine while you proofread. When you cast an essay in the present tense, you need to remain consistent throughout. However, you likely will need to describe actions that occurred in the past or began in the past and are still ongoing in the present. To troubleshoot successfully, first review the tenses and then check your verbs to ensure proper form. This handout serves as a guide for the process.

PART ONE

Present Tense

Use the present tense when writing narratives in which you want the action to seem immediate. Remember that if you begin an essay or narrative in present tense, you must be consistent.

- 1. Simple present** is derived from the infinitive form (ex., *to know*).
 - To indicate habitual actions (often includes time marker: *usually, every day, etc.*):
Every August, the hummingbirds begin their migration to Mexico.
 - To indicate general truths:
The earth maintains an elliptical orbit of the sun.
 - To describe current action (usually in a narrative passage):
Harris asks the committee members for their input.
 - To reference an author's ideas or language in academic and analytical writing:
Johnson argues that stricter guidelines are needed for offshore drilling.
- 2. Present progressive:** (am/is/are + verb + -ing)
 - To signify ongoing action:
They are revising the guidelines for ethical hiring practices.
- 3. Present perfect:** (have/has + past participle)
 - Action begun in the past and continuing into the present:
I have studied Shakespeare's sonnets all my life.
 - Action begun in the past and recently completed:
Sara has researched climate change agreements for her term paper project.
- 4. Present perfect progressive:** (have/has + been + verb + -ing)
 - To indicate length of time action has been underway:
Wallace has been working here since 1998.

Past Tense

Most narratives are written in the past tense, as are many essays dealing events rather than ideas. Learning past tense forms will help you to maintain consistency and to recognize errors in shift.

- 1. Simple past** is created by changing the verb's vowel or ending (-ed, -t).
 - To indicate completed actions or occurrences.
Ben stayed home. Ann meant to revise her paper. The professor gave a quiz.

Irregular verbs have past tense forms that follow no rule and simply must be learned by reviewing a handbook or consulting a dictionary:
bring/brought, lie/lay, sell/sold, etc.

2. **Past progressive:** (was/were + verb + -ing)

To indicate an ongoing action at a specified time in the past:

When Jim called the meeting to order, the members were arguing about rules.

3. **Past perfect:** (had + past participle)

To indicate an action completed before another past event:

When I arrived at the meeting, the secretary had called the roll.

4. **Past perfect progressive:** (had + been + verb + -ing)

Indicates past ongoing action and a point in time when a specific past event occurred or when the ongoing action ended. Description of the ongoing action may include duration.

They had been camping alone for two weeks when the bear attacked.

Until this semester, he had been commuting from Tulsa for two years.

Future Tense

Future tense is used to indicate actions not yet underway, in a variety of circumstances described below.

1. **Simple future:** (will + simple present verb)

To indicate actions that have not yet occurred:

The reporter will interview Jones on television tomorrow.

Simple future alternatives:

(am/is/are + going to + simple present verb)

The reporter is going to interview Jones tomorrow.

(simple present verb + future adverb of time)

The reporter interviews Jones tomorrow.

(present progressive verb + future adverb of time)

The reporter is interviewing Jones tomorrow.

2. **Future progressive:** (will + be + verb + -ing)

To indicate an ongoing action that will happen in the future:

Wilson will be interviewing applicants on Thursday.

3. **Future perfect:** (will + have + past participle)

To indicate an action that will be completed by a future point in time:

By the time Wilson finishes his interviews, the auditor will have returned.

4. **Future perfect progressive:** (will + have + been + verb + -ing)

To mark progress or completion of an ongoing action at a future point in time:

By next Thursday, the auditor will have been working here for two months.

Auxiliary and Modal Verbs

The auxiliary verbs work in combination with main verbs to help indicate time and other meanings.

Auxiliary	Example	Purpose
Forms of <i>be</i> and <i>have</i>		
<i>be</i> + -ing	<i>The students are writing papers.</i>	show ongoing action
<i>have/has</i> + past participle	<i>John has worked on his essay since last Friday.</i>	show action started in past and ongoing
<i>will</i> + <i>have</i> + past participle	<i>Sue will have written ten pages by Monday.</i>	show action to be completed at future time
Forms of <i>do</i> (<i>did</i>, <i>does</i>)		
To pose a question	<i>How do you like your composition class?</i>	inquire regarding action or feeling
To negate main verb	<i>John did not write a proper introduction.</i>	show action not completed
To emphasize main verb	<i>Sue does work hard on all her papers.</i>	emphasize habitual action

Modals work in combination with main verbs and auxiliaries to indicate a wide variety of meanings, including ability, possibility, intention, permission or request, and obligation.

Modal	Example	Purpose
Ability (<i>can</i> , <i>could</i> , <i>be able to</i>)	<i>The professor can explain concepts clearly.</i>	show ability to perform action
	<i>Sometimes, the class could grasp complex ideas.</i>	same as above
	<i>John is able to help his fellow students with grammar.</i>	same
Possibility (<i>may</i> , <i>might</i> , <i>could</i> , <i>may/might/could have</i>) + past participle	<i>Some students could fail the assignment.</i>	show possibility of action's occurrence
	<i>Some students may/might fail the assignment.</i>	same as above
	<i>Sally may have failed the assignment.</i>	same
Intention (<i>will</i> , <i>shall</i> , <i>would</i>)	<i>Sally will appeal her grade.</i>	emphasize subject's intention to perform action
	<i>Shall we meet to discuss our drafts?</i>	inquire regarding listener's willingness to perform action
	<i>John would have helped Sally.</i>	show subject's past intention to perform action
Permission (<i>can</i> , <i>may</i> , <i>could</i>)	<i>The students may select their own topics.</i>	show subjects' permission to perform action
	<i>Ben can write about space exploration.</i>	same as above
	<i>Last semester, the students could write personal essays.</i>	show subjects' past permission to perform action
Request (<i>can</i> , <i>could</i> , <i>would</i>)	<i>Can you show me how to find sources in the databases?</i>	ask listener to perform action
	<i>Could/Would you ask the professor for an extension?</i>	same as above
Obligation (<i>must</i> , <i>has to</i> , <i>be supposed to</i>)	<i>The students must include proper citation in their papers.</i>	show subjects' obligation to perform action
	<i>John has to finish his rough draft tomorrow.</i>	same as above

PART TWO

Troubleshooting Tense Shifts

The following section outlines common verb tense errors and explains how to make corrections.

1. **An analytical essay cast in the present tense accidentally slips into using the past tense verbs used by the source. This error is especially common when analyzing literature.**

(x) *At the beginning of Anna Karenina, Oblonsky's unfaithfulness is revealed. His wife, Dolly, is furious over his affair with the French governess. Oblonsky's sister, Anna, soon **arrived** and **persuaded** Dolly to forgive him.*

Changing the bolded verbs to present tense corrects the errors and maintains consistency:

(✓) *At the beginning of Anna Karenina, Oblonsky's unfaithfulness is revealed. His wife, Dolly, is furious over his affair with the French governess. Oblonsky's sister, Anna, soon **arrives** and **persuades** Dolly to forgive him.*

2. **When reporting in the past tense, the student writer slips into the present tense. The error is easy to commit because many of us make this shift while speaking.**

(x) *Younger adults aged 18-24 were recruited for the experiment. Participants were compensated with a \$25 bookstore gift certificate. We **begin** by having all participants sign a consent form, and then participants **are told** the purpose and procedures of the experiment.*

To maintain consistency, the present tense verbs must be changed to past tense:

(✓) *Younger adults aged 18-24 were recruited for the experiment. Participants were compensated with a \$25 bookstore gift certificate. We **began** by having all participants sign a consent form, and then participants **were told** the purpose and procedures of the experiment.*

3. **When a sentence contains a specific reference point in time (often a prepositional phrase beginning with *by*), use the past or perfect tense.**

(x) *While we briefed the subjects on the experiment, our assistants **prepare** the lab environment.*

When the actions are concurrent, the verbs tenses must be consistent. The briefing and the preparing occur at the same time, in the past, so both verbs should be past tense:

(✓) *While we briefed the subjects on the experiment, our assistants **prepared** the lab environment.*

(x) *By October, all of the hummingbirds **will migrate** to Mexico.*

"By October" marks a specific point in the future. The action of migrating, also in the future, will have occurred before October. Instead of the future tense, the future perfect tense is used:

(✓) *By October, all of the hummingbirds **will have migrated** to Mexico.*

4. **When writing about general truths, such as laws of nature, geographical facts, and maxims or proverbs, use the present tense, even in a past tense essay.**

(x) *In 1543, Copernicus discovered the earth **orbited** the sun.*

Since the earth's orbit of the sun is an astronomical phenomenon, an event that occurs today as it has for millions of years, change the verb to the present tense:

(✓) *In 1543, Copernicus discovered the earth **orbits** the sun.*

5. Use the proper sequence of tenses with participles. Participle tense is determined by the verb tense in the predicate of the main clause.

a. The present perfect participle is used to indicate action occurring before the time expressed by the main verb.

(x) *Predicting a victory for the incumbent, the pollster was surprised by the vote.*

The prediction occurred before the surprise, so the present perfect is required:

(✓) *Having predicted a victory for the incumbent, the pollster was surprised by the vote.*

b. The present participle is used to indicate action occurring at the same time as the main verb.

(x) *Having sought shelter from the media, the pollster retreated to his office.*

The seeking shelter and the retreating to the office occur at the same time, so the present participle is required:

(✓) *Seeking shelter from the media, the pollster retreated to his office.*

6. Use the proper sequence of tenses with infinitives.

a. The present infinitive is the verb's simple form preceded by the word *to* (*to write*). Present infinitive is used to indicate action that occurs at the same time as or later than the action indicated by the main verb.

(x) *The pollster would have liked to have explained his methods before the broadcast aired.*

The action expressed in the infinitive (*explain*), occurred at the same time or later than the action in the main verb (*like*): the action actually didn't occur but the pollster wanted it to! He wanted to explain himself, all the way up to the time the broadcast aired. The proper tense is the present infinitive:

(✓) *The pollster would have liked to explain his methods before the broadcast aired.*

b. The perfect infinitive is the verb's past participle preceded by *to have* (*to have written*). The perfect infinitive is used to indicate action that occurs before the action indicated by the main verb.

(x) *The candidate would have liked to have campaigned in all fifty states.*

If the writer means to say that today, as the candidate reflects on the campaign, he wishes he had campaigned in all fifty states, then the main verb should be present, and the infinitive perfect because it indicates past action (or a desire to have performed that action):

(✓) *The candidate would like to have campaigned in all fifty states.*

7. Use the proper sequence of tense in conditional sentences, which have a subordinate clause and a main clause. A specific verb tense is required for each. The chart that follows should help you to understand the various conditions and required tenses.

Conditional	Subordinate Clause Verb	Main Clause Verb	Example
Speculation			
Possible in Present	past	would/could/might + simple verb form	If the pollster appeared before the media, they would question his projections.
Possible in Past	past perfect	would/could/might + have + past participle	If the pollster had used different methods, he might have predicted the winner.
	were	would/could/might + simple verb form	If the pollster were more accessible, we could understand more clearly how he erred.
Possible in Future	present + time marker	may/might/could/should + simple verb	If the pollster grants an interview tomorrow, we might learn more.
Impossible in Present	past perfect	would/could/might + present perfect	If Robert Kennedy had lived , he might have advanced civil rights legislation.
Prediction			
	present	future	Unless the pollster makes changes, his reputation will be compromised .
Cause and Effect			
	present	present	When the polls close in many states, the cable stations begin projecting winners.
	past	past	When the proposition legalizing marijuana failed , many voters expressed surprise.

*past participle

The past participle is used to form several verb tenses covered in Part One of this handout. It also functions as an adjective modifying nouns and pronouns (ex., *The secretary filed all reviewed applications*). The past participle of many verbs is formed by combining the simple verb form with -d or -ed. Irregular verbs do not follow the pattern, and their participial forms must be learned. The chart below shows the forms of a few common regular and irregular verbs.

Simple Form	Past Tense	Past Participle
help	helped	helped
review	reviewed	reviewed
hear	heard	heard
bet	bet	bet
choose	chose	chosen
draw	drew	drawn
drink	drank	drunk
see	saw	seen

Works Consulted

Batko, Ann. *When Bad Grammar Happens to Good People: How to Avoid Common Errors in English*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 2009. Print.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *The St. Martin's Handbook*. 8th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2015. Print.