

quicks tips

VERB TENSE

Problem

Incorrect verb tense can cause confusion—readers may not understand when events happened.

Inconsistent verb tense (i.e., arbitrary shifts between past and present) can be particularly irritating to the reader, and readers may conclude that you failed to proofread your paper.

Solutions

UNLESS THERE IS A SHIFT IN THE TIME FRAME, MAINTAIN THE SAME VERB TENSE. To proofread, lightly underline every verb in the passage and check that it is in the correct tense, especially when narrating past events, as past tense is typically more difficult to maintain.

Incorrect: I told him that he can drop by any time and I will be happy to help him.

Correct: I told him that he could drop by any time and I would be happy to help him.

Incorrect: When we arrived, we are upset to learn that we have missed our flight.

Correct: When we arrived, we were upset to learn that we had missed our flight.

Incorrect: In each episode, Samurai Jack encounters many hazards, but he overcame them and continued on his quest to defeat Aku.

Correct: In each episode, Samurai Jack encounters many hazards, but he overcomes them and continues on his quest to defeat Aku.

NOTE: Certain tenses and modals are usually used together:

- present and present perfect tenses with *can* and *will* and *have*
- past and past perfect tenses with *could* and *would* and *had*.

LEARN WHEN IT IS APPROPRIATE TO MIX VERB TENSES.

- **When there is a shift in time frame (often marked by a transition), for example, from general description (present tense) to a specific occasion (past tense):**

Tom Sawyer is a clever boy who doesn't like to follow the rules, and as a result, he often gets into trouble. On one occasion, he **convinced** the boys in his neighborhood to pay him for the privilege of whitewashing a fence.

- **When relating current mental activity (present tense) about past events (past tense):**

I don't remember when I **met** him, but I think it **was** about ten years ago.

The author describes the path of development that Japan **took** after WWII.

ANALYZE TYPICAL WRITING IN YOUR FIELD to determine typical use and mixing of verb tenses—preferences can vary. For example, literary criticism is usually written in present tense, whereas the methods section of a lab report is in past tense.

REVIEW THE GRAMMAR RULES. Learn which verb tense(s) are typically difficult for you, and proofread specifically for those errors. Keep your purpose in mind as you choose the best tense.

- Use the **simple present** (argue/argues, is/are) to discuss general truths, habitual actions, works of literature, and an author's ideas or arguments.

Friends are as important in old age as they are during childhood.
Barn swallows usually nest in small colonies and also hunt together.
Clark believes this is a significant problem and suggests various solutions.

- Use the **simple past** (argued, was) to describe events that happened at a specific time in the past and are now finished, as in history papers, news reports, narrative examples, lab results, etc. This tense is often used with a time phrase like “in 1980” or “last summer” or “ten years ago.”

In 1066 William of Normandy invaded England and claimed the throne.
I graduated from high school when I was seventeen.

- Use the **present perfect** (have argued, have been) for events that happened in the indefinite past. In other words, you don't know the specific dates, or they are not important:

Several studies have examined the effect of ...

It is also used for recent events:

The president has announced his new cabinet members.

It is also used for situations that began in the past but include the present:

I have worked here for six months.

(I started working here six months ago and I still work here today.)

- Use the **past perfect** (had argued, had been) in conjunction with simple past tense to establish a relationship between two completed events—use past perfect for the event that happened prior to the other. This tense is often used with “already” or “by the time”:

My mother had already finished her studies when she met my father.

He entered the building unnoticed because the guard had stepped out for a cup of coffee.

For more information:

Azar, B. S. (1989) *Understanding and using English grammar*. (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Berry, C., Brizee, A., Angeli, E., & Ghafoor, M. (2017). Verb Tenses. In *Purdue Online Writing Lab*. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/601/01/>