Often, complications within the English language emerge around the use of verb tenses. Of the 12 verb tenses in English, three tenses are used most frequently: present (it is), past (it was), and future (it will be). Problems occur when writers switch tenses within a sentence or within a paragraph without a legitimate reason, such as changing tenses to show a shift in time. In this issue, we discuss the basics of verb tenses and demonstrate why good writing should maintain verb tense consistency.

*Verb Tense Consistency*

*There are three main verb forms for showing time or tense:*

**Simple Tense:** does not use auxiliary verbs (forms of to be, to have, and to do) and refers to a specific period during which something happens, something happened and is over, or something will happen.

- Simple present (action goes on now): *I sit*
- Simple past (action happened and is over): *I sat*
- Simple future (action will happen): *I will sit*

**Perfect Tense:** uses have, has, or had as auxiliary verb and allows action to continue over time

- Present perfect (action happened and may still be going on): *I have sat*
- Past perfect (action happened before another event happened in the past): *I had sat*
- Future perfect (action that will end before another event in the future happened): *I will have sat down long before the bus arrives.*

**Progressive Tense:** uses is, are, was, or were as auxiliary verb with -ing ending on main verb and focuses on “progress” of action

- Present progressive (action is in progress right now): *I am sitting*
- Past progressive (action was in progress in the past): *I was sitting*
- Future progressive (action will be in progress in the future): *I will be sitting*

Each of the above tenses denotes a **specific time** for an action or event to take place. Writers should be careful to use the exact tense needed to describe, narrate, or explain. In general, do not switch from one tense to another unless the timing of an action demands that you do so.

*Source: Towson University*
Example of acceptable switch in verb tense to show a change in time reference:
Barbara **sings** in the church choir, **belts** out songs at karaoke, and often **bursts** into solos while walking through the mall. However, at one time she **was** too shy to sing a note, and once **hid** behind the curtains to sing “Happy Birthday” at a friend’s party. (Verb tense shifts from present tense in first sentence to past tense in second sentence.)

Mark **earned** his MSW/MDiv in Kentucky and **started** working as a pastoral counselor in Tennessee. Later, he **returned** to school and **pursued** a PhD in social work. Now he **works** as a therapist in the Chapel Hill community. (Verb tense shifts from past tense in first two sentences to present tense in third sentence.)

**Keep verb tense consistent in sentences, paragraphs, and essays!!**

**Examples:**

Incorrect: Rod **was** responsible for his brother’s care and **has made** parental decisions in his mother’s absence.

Correct: Rod **was** responsible for his brother’s care and **made** parental decisions in his mother’s absence.

or Rod **has been** responsible for his brother’s care and **has made** parental decisions in his mother’s absence.

Incorrect: Terri **has** attachment issues and **has** difficulties verbalizing her feelings. For example, whenever she **was** upset she **cried**.

Correct: Terri **has** attachment issues and **has** difficulties verbalizing her feelings. For example, whenever she **is** upset, she **cries**.

Incorrect: Because high caseloads **increased** worker burnout, the agency **has asked** multiple times for more positions; however, the board **declines** each request.

Correct: Because high caseloads **increase** worker burnout, the agency **has asked** multiple times for more positions; however, the board **has declined** each request.

Incorrect: According to Clark and Wells (1995), when consumers with social anxiety **were placed** in situations that **would ignite** fear, they **would resort to behaviors that created** a sense of safety.

Correct: According to Clark and Wells (1995), when consumers with social anxiety **were placed** in situations that **ignited** fear, they **resorted** to behaviors that **created** a sense of safety.

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Need Writing Assistance? Susan and Diane are here to help!
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