



Verb Tense Consistency

Controlling Shifts in Verb Tense

Writing often involves telling stories, whether it is a narration or an anecdote. Even an essay that does not explicitly tell a story involves implied time frames. Changes in verb tense help readers understand the relationships among various events. But inconsistent shifts in tense can cause confusion. Generally, writers maintain one tense for the main discourse and indicate changes in time frame by changing tense relative to that primary tense. Even non-narrative writing should use verb tenses clearly and consistently.

Do not shift from one tense to another if the time frame for each action or state is the same.

Examples:

- Incorrect:** The ocean contains rich minerals that washed down from rivers and streams.
Contains is present tense, referring to a current state; *washed down* is past, but should be present (*wash down*) because the minerals are currently continuing to *wash down*.
Correct: The ocean *contains* rich minerals that *wash down* from rivers and streams.
- Incorrect:** About noon the sky darkened, a breeze sprang up, and a low rumble announces the approaching storm.
Darkened and *sprang up* are past tense verbs; *announces* is present but should be past (*announced*) to maintain consistency within the time frame.
Correct: About noon the sky *darkened*, a breeze *sprang up*, and a low rumble *announced* the approaching storm.
- Incorrect:** Yesterday we *had walked* to school but later rode the bus home.
Had walked is past perfect tense but should be past to maintain consistency within the time frame (yesterday); *rode* is past, referring to an action completed before the current time frame.
Correct: Yesterday we *walked* to school but later *rode* the bus home.

Do shift tense to indicate a change in time frame from one action or state to another.

Examples:

- Correct:** The children love their new tree house, which they built themselves.
Love is present tense, referring to a current state (they still *love* it now;) *built* is past, referring to an action completed before the current time frame (they are not still *building* it.)
- Correct:** Before they even began deliberations, many jury members had reached a verdict.
Began is past tense, referring to an action completed before the current time frame; *had reached* is past perfect, referring to action from a time frame before that of another past event (the action of *reaching* was completed before the action of beginning.)
- Correct:** Workers are installing extra loudspeakers because the music for tonight's concert will need amplification.
Are installing is present progressive, referring to an ongoing action in the current time frame (the workers *are still installing*, and have not finished;) *will need* is future, referring to action expected to begin after the current time frame (the concert will start in the future, and that's when it *will need* amplification.)