

#19) Verb Tenses ~ Correcting Shifts

Shifts in tense are among the most difficult errors to find, since they often "sound" just fine while you proofread. The only sure-fire way to find errors in tense is to become well acquainted with the basic tenses. Then, you simply check each verb to make sure its tense agrees with the tense of your essay or narrative. You should also be aware of a few special instances in which tense shifts are particularly tempting.

Remember that tense in writing is a matter of correct and consistent form, and not merely of the time setting of an essay or story. Tense is not identical with time in writing. You may express ideas about the past in a present tense essay or story without shifting tense, just as you may portray a sense of the present time in a past tense story. The key is to be consistent with tense even when your portrayal of time is complex.

There are times when a shift in tense is allowable, or even necessary, but these times are few. One of the most common times in which you will shift tense is in subordinate clauses which deal with the past in a present tense piece. You may also make a complete change from one tense to another if you prepare your reader for the shift by leaving a white space before it, or by dividing your piece into numbered sections. Changes in tense usually occur only in narrative essays. In the vast majority of writing, it is necessary to be consistent with tense.

Present Tense

Use the present tense to write essays about literature and to write narratives in which you want the action to seem as if it's happening while it's being told. Remember that if you begin an essay in present tense, you must be consistent in that tense throughout the entire essay. Check all the main verbs in your essay after you review the following forms of the present tense.

1. The **present tense** of a verb is its infinitive form; that is, the simple verb: I **know**, you **know**, he **knows**. (The s on a verb with a third-person subject, such as he, does not change the tense.) There are several more complex forms of the present tense:
2. **Present progressive:** (present be+verb+ing) I *am walking*, he *is walking*, you *are walking*.
You will often use this form of present tense to signify action that is ongoing at the time of speaking. The form of present progressive is the present tense of be plus the main verb, plus the *ing* suffix. Remember that the present forms of be are is, am, and are.
3. **Present perfect:** (present have+verb+ed) I *have known*, you *have known*, he *has known*.
This tense is used to signify action that has been completed prior to the time of speaking. The present forms of have are has (for singular subjects) and have.
These are the basic tenses, but don't be surprised to find yourself using these forms of the present tense as well:
4. **Present perfect progressive:** (present have+been+verb+ing) He *has been walking*
5. **Present passive:** (present be+verb+ed) He *is kissed*.
6. **Present perfect passive:** (present have+been+verb+ed) He *has been kissed*.
Other auxiliary verbs (besides have and be) also have tense. Do and does are present, as are May, can, should. All of these modal auxiliaries are followed by the simple infinitive form of the verb. He **may** go, I **can** go, she **should** go.

Past Tense

Most narratives are written in the past tense, as are many essays which deal with events rather than ideas. Work on the forms of past tense, not only so you can be consistent with tense in your past tense writing, but so you can recognize past tense where it doesn't belong in present tense pieces.

1. Change a verb to the **past tense** by adding the -ed ending; or, in some verbs, by changing the vowel. I *walked*, she *slept*, he *knew*.

Here are some forms of the past tense which you may need to use:

2. **Past progressive tense:** (past be+verb+ing) He *was sleeping*. This tense is used to indicate action which occurs simultaneously with other action in the past: Nero *was fiddling* when Rome burned. The past forms of be, which is the auxiliary for progressive tense, are *was* and *were*. Nero *was fiddling*, but you *were fighting* the fire.
3. **Past perfect tense:** (past have(= had)+verb+ed) He *had eaten*. This form of past tense is used to show action

which occurs before the action you are writing about. The past form of have is had. Before she became a dentist, she *had vowed* never to treat patients for free.

4. **Past passive:** (past be+verb+ed) He was *kissed*.

5. **Past perfect passive:** (past have(=had)+been+verb+ed) She *had been* kissed.*

6. **Past perfect progressive:** (past have+been+verb+ing) They *had been* camping.*

Some other auxiliaries you will use in the past tense are did, might, should, would, and could. They are followed by the simple infinitive form of the verb: He *did* eat; She thought he *would* leave.

Future Tense

Technically, the future "tense" is really a subset of the present tense. Ideas about the future are therefore expressed with various phrases (I am going to eat) and auxiliaries (She may/will recover) in pieces which are otherwise in the present tense. However, many grammar texts list the form of the future as *will/shall+verb*. Regardless, we use the **future tense** in present tense writing to express ideas that may happen after the present. In an essay written in the past tense, ideas after the time being spoken about may be expressed with the modal auxiliary would. He would later go.

*See the "Trouble Shooters Guide" for when to use perfect tense.

Trouble-Shooter's Guide To Tense Shifts

There are a few times when shifts in tense are particularly tempting, and when their correction seems impossible or awkward without ruining the sense of the passage. These situations generally have fairly simple solutions. Here are a few of the most common mistakes in tense, together with suggestions for their correction.

Shifting to the past tense in a present tense essay

The most common error in tense is shifting to the past tense when discussing other people's writing, which we almost always write about in the present tense. This error occurs for the following reasons:

1. The tense of past tense literature bleeds into the tense of your summary. (Tense shifts are in bold face.)

At the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, Oblonsky is introduced as an unfaithful husband. His wife, Dolly, was furious because of his affair with the French governess. Oblonsky's sister, Anna, soon **arrived** and **persuaded** Dolly to forgive him.

Although putting the bold-face verbs into present tense may sound strange at first, it will soon become clear that discussing past tense literature in the present tense sounds just fine:

At the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, Oblonsky is introduced as an unfaithful husband. His wife, Dolly, is furious because of his affair with the French governess. Oblonsky's sister, Anna, soon arrives and persuades Dolly to forgive him.

The correction is simply a matter of finding the past tense main verbs (see the forms of verbs above) and changing them into the present tense.

2. Two separate actions in the literature, one of which occurs before the time-frame you are summarizing, can create awkward situations in the summary:

Ellen Goodman sets down some good rules for relationships in her essay "Being Loved Anyway". Her childhood recollection of her father is her main example. Every morning, he **stared** into the mirror and **said**, "You're no bargain", and this ritual **kept** him easy to get along with.

The action which has been tense-shifted occurs long before the time of the essay, so we cannot simply change the verbs to present tense without creating time confusion. The solution to this problem is deceptively simple: put the past tense material in a subordinate clause, the tense of which can be whatever we wish it to be. When summarizing passages of prior action, it is often helpful to subordinate, not only to eradicate tense problems, but also to clarify the relationship of the two time periods being discussed. Compare the following revision with the shifted passage:

Ellen Goodman sets down some good rules for relationships in her essay "Being Loved Anyway". She recalls that, when she was a child, her father would stare at himself in the mirror every morning and say, "You're no bargain." Goodman asserts that the ritual kept him easy to get along with.

The revision does not change the tense of most of the problematic verbs, it merely places them in a subordinate, "that" clause, in which past tense is permissible. The main verb, in the revised passage, is the present tense "recalls," which sets the tense of the entire sentence. The revision also solves another problem: attributing the comments to Goodman sorts out which assertions are Goodman's and which are the essay writer's.

3. Reminding readers of an earlier event in the literature, while discussing a later event, can cause tense confusion:

Romeo rushes to the tomb and finds Juliet, as he thinks, dead. Juliet **took** the sleeping potion given her by the Friar and **was** put into a death-like sleep.

The problem the writer faces here is of reporting an earlier action while discussing a later one. The problem is easily solved by putting the prior action in present perfect tense:

Romeo rushes to the tomb and finds Juliet, as he thinks, dead. Juliet has taken the sleeping potion given her by the Friar and has been put into a death-like sleep.

Remember the present perfect: it is an extremely handy tool for keeping present tense essays in the present tense.

Shifting to the present tense in a past tense essay

1. You can slip into the present tense in the story-teller mode.

It is natural to tell stories about ourselves in the present tense; we do it in conversation all the time. However, this habit becomes a problem in past tense narratives:

I drew the shades in my house and sat down in front of the TV. This guy **comes** on, talking about how the C.I.A., the car companies, and Johnson and Johnson **are** all involved in a plot to overthrow the government.

Correcting tense is simply a matter of changing the present tense verbs into the past:

I drew the shades in my house and sat down in front of the TV. This guy came on, talking about how the C.I.A., the car companies, and Johnson and Johnson were all involved in a plot to overthrow the government.

2. Relating past events which are still true can cause tense confusion.

My mother told us to be ever vigilant for chances to help others; she wanted us to give part of what we were blessed with to people less fortunate. My mother, to be quite candid, is more conscious of the community's needs than her own.

While the writer's mother may still be alive, it isn't necessary to change the tense of the story. Past tense here is a matter of form, and bears no comment on the mother's health. The correction is to change present tense is to past tense was.

Avoiding other common errors of tense

1. Be aware of when to use perfect tense.

Any time a sentence contains a specific reference point in time (usually a prepositional phrase beginning with "by"), use the perfect tenses. Here are some examples in which the perfect form is inappropriately left out; the first is a future tense example, the second is past.

a. By noon, I **will eat** all of the leftover pizza.

Correction: By noon, I will have eaten all of the leftover pizza.

Note the specific reference point, "by noon." The correction is to change the future present tense to the future perfect "have eaten." Here is a tense-shifted sentence from a past tense essay:

b. As early as July 3, 1934, Augustus **met** everybody who was anybody in St. Louis.

Correction: As early as July 3, 1934, Augustus had met everybody who was anybody in St. Louis.

Here, we change the simple past tense "met" to the perfect "had met".

2. Be careful not to use "extra" tenses.

A surprisingly common tense shift is the use of perfect or progressive forms where they are not required. Note the awkward verb forms in the following excerpt from a past tense essay:

Though the Department of Defense **had classified** information about the use of the Harrier aircraft during Desert Storm, we can assume the aircraft **were** probably **flying** night-time missions fairly regularly.

Here, the verbs should be simple past tense:

Though the Department of Defense classified information about the use of the Harrier aircraft during Desert Storm, we can assume that the aircraft probably flew night-time missions fairly regularly.

3. Speak of things which are always true in the present tense. Things which you should speak of in the present tense, even in a past tense essay, are truisms, such as laws of nature, geographical facts, and maxims or proverbs.

In 1939, I learned that the moon **went** around the earth.

Since the moon still goes around the earth, change the clause to the present tense:

In 1939, I learned that the moon goes around the earth.

4. Subordinate clauses governed by a past tense main verb must be in the past tense:

Mr. Magoo saw poorly because he never wore (not wears) his glasses.

5. Verbals are also subject to tense shift; make sure that sequence of action is clear:

Enraged by the accusations, Paula regained her composure.

Since Paula was clearly enraged before she was composed, let the perfect form of the passive participle reflect that fact:

Having been enraged by the accusations, Paula regained her composure.

Quick-Reference Chart

For your brief reference, here is a chart of a verb in each tense, plus a list of the auxiliaries and modals. Check any verb you are wondering about against the examples under the appropriate tense, substituting your verb for stir; remember that some verbs form their simple past tense and past participle with a vowel change rather than by adding ed/en/t.)

	Present	Past
Simple:	stir/stirs	stirred
Perfect:	has/have stirred	had stirred
Progressive:	is/am/are stirring	was/were stirring
Perfect Progressive:	has/have been stirring	had been stirring
Passive:	is/am/are stirred	was/were stirred
Passive Progressive:	is/am/are being stirred	was/were being stirred

The verb you're checking may also be part of a verb phrase which begins with one of the following auxiliaries.

Auxiliaries:	will	would
	can	could
	may	might
	shall	should
	do/does	did
	must	
	(be)> is/am/are	was/were
	have/has	had