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VERB TENSE

Use of the correct verb tense allows you to express clearly the time relationships among your ideas. When deciding which verb tense to use, aim for consistency, simplicity, and clarity. Whenever possible, keep verbs in the same tense (consistency), and use either the simple present or the past tense (simplicity). Above all, choose the verb tense that most clearly expresses the idea you want to convey (clarity). In general, use the *present tense* to describe actions and states of being that are still true in the present; use the *past tense* to describe actions or states of being that occurred exclusively in the past.

PRESENT TENSE

Use the present tense to make generalizations about your topic or the views of scholars:

- The two Indus artifacts <u>provide</u> insight into ancient Hindu culture.
- Marxist historians <u>argue</u> that class conflict shapes political affairs.
- At the end of the chorus, the sopranos <u>repeat</u> the main theme.

Use the present tense to cite an author or another source (except in science writing, where past tense is used; see below).

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 <u>reflects</u> the idealism of the Second World War.
- The historian Donna Harsch <u>states</u> that "Social Democrats tried to prevent the triumph of Nazism in order to save the republic and democracy" (3).

(n.b.: whether or not the author is still living is not relevant to selection of tense.)

PAST TENSE

Use the past tense to describe actions or states of being that occurred exclusively in the past:

- Hemingway <u>drew</u> on his experiences in World War I in constructing the character of Jake Barnes.
- We <u>completed</u> the interviews in January, 2001.

PRESENT AND PAST TENSE TOGETHER

At times you will use both *present* and *past tense* to show shifts between time relationships. Use *present* tense for those ideas/observations that are considered timeless and past tense for actions occurring in the past:

- The *Padshahnama* is an ancient manuscript owned by the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. This manuscript details the history of Shah-Jahan, the Muslim ruler who commissioned the building of the Taj Mahal (Webb et al. 134).

- Flynn (1999) concluded that high school students are more likely to smoke cigarettes if they have a parent who smokes.

- Simon (2000) observed that neutered cats spend less time stalking their prey.

WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

Use the *present* tense to describe *fictional* events that occur in the text:
(This use of present tense is referred to as "the historical present.")

- In Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Satan tempts Eve in the form of a serpent.

- Voltaire's Candide encounters numerous misfortunes throughout his travels.

Also use the *present* tense to report your interpretations and the interpretations of other sources:

- Odysseus represents the archetypal epic hero.

- Flanagan suggests that Satan is the protagonist of *Paradise Lost.*

Use the *past* tense to explain historical context or elements of the author's life that occurred exclusively in the past:

- Hemingway drew on his experiences in World War I in constructing the character of Jake Barnes.

When writing about literature, use both present and past tense when combining observations about fictional events from the text (present tense) with factual information (past tense):

- James Joyce, who grew up in the Catholic faith, draws on church doctrine to illuminate the roots of Stephen Dedalus' guilt.

- In *Les Belles Images,* Simone de Beauvoir accurately portrays the complexities of a marriage even though she never married in her lifetime.

Use the *present perfect* tense to describe an event that occurs in the text previous to the principal event you are describing:

- The governess questions the two children because she believes they have seen the ghosts.

- Convinced that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him, Othello strangles her.

Use the *past* tense when referring to an event occurring before the story begins:

- In the opening scenes of *Hamlet*, the men are visited by the ghost of Hamlet's father, whom Claudius murdered.

WRITING FOR SCIENCE

Most of the time, use *past* tense when writing for science.

Use *past* tense to discuss completed studies and experiments:

- We extracted tannins from the leaves by bringing them to a boil in 50% methanol.

- We hypothesized that adults would remember more items than children.

Use *past* tense when referring to information from outside sources:

- Paine (1966) argued that predators and parasites are more abundant in the tropics than elsewhere.

- Kerr (1993) related the frequency of web-decorating behavior with the presence of birds on different Pacific islands.

(N.B.: a common mistake in science writing is the use of present tense when referring to what other authors have written.)

As in writing for other disciplines, use *present* tense in science writing when describing an idea or fact that is still true in the present:

- Genetic information is encoded in the sequence of nucleotides on DNA.

- Previous research showed that children confuse the source of their memories more often than adults (Lindsey et al. 1991).

Also use *present* tense in science writing when the *idea* is the subject of the sentence and the citation remains fully in parentheses:

- Sexual dimorphism in body size is common among butterflies (Singer 1982).

Contrast the above sentence to the following, also correct, construction:

- Singer (1982) stated that sexual dimorphism in body size is common among butterflies.

The logic and practice of the discipline for which you write determine verb tense. If you have questions about tense or other writing concerns, check with your professor.

Works Cited

Webb, Suzanne, Robert Miller, and Winifred Horner. *Hodges' Harbrace Handbook*, fourteenth edition. Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001.

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