

Grammar: Verb tenses

A common error in essay writing is in the use of time or verb tense (present, past and future forms). Native speakers of English use verb tenses unconsciously, but may use the incorrect form or change tenses inappropriately during writing (i.e. lose 'sense' by switching backwards and forwards between tenses). In academic writing, there are conventions about using tense correctly and about using tense consistently. You will need to know about:

1. Recognising the tenses
2. Using present tense in your writing
3. Using past tense in your writing
4. Using future tense in your writing
5. Controlling shifts in verb tenses

NOTE: APA referencing style is used in used in this fact sheet.



GRAMMAR CHECKERS will NOT help at all with getting your **verb tenses** correct. It cannot read shifts in tense and will not alert you to check for this. It can sometimes signal incorrect irregular verbs when you are using past tense, but this is not consistent. You will need to proofread your work yourself, checking for correct and consistent verb tense.

1. Recognising the tenses

Verbs in English give a sense of time in speech and writing. There are three main 'times' that we use to convey information: present, past and future. Verb tenses are used to express the relationship between time and other factors so that we can tell if an action is still in progress (**PRESENT**), completed (**PAST**), or predicting future action or events (**FUTURE**).

Examples

- ✓ Thinking skills are very helpful for questioning information and opinions in a text. (**PRESENT**)
- ✓ Students are taught higher level thinking skills in the ASO training programs. (**PRESENT**)
- ✓ In the 1980s, many studies investigated the role of critical thinking skills in academic writing. (**PAST**)
- ✓ Before the 1970s, most information was reproduced uncritically by students in exams. (**PAST**)
- ✓ It is hoped that future generations will be skilful at critically assessing Internet data. (**FUTURE**)
- ✓ By the end of the course, students should have learned strategies for critical reading. (**FUTURE**)

2. Using present tense in your writing

Academic writing mostly uses **PRESENT** tense to state facts, to make generalisations and to report on the research and ideas of others.

- **Rule 1:** Use the **PRESENT** tense in most of your writing when you are expressing your ideas.

Example

- ✓ Smith (2009, p. 3) **claims** that critical thinking is the process by which the reader detects and analyses the assumptions that lie beneath the actions, decisions and judgments in information. Therefore, critical thinking processes seek to evaluate the intellectual work of others by searching for strengths as well as weaknesses through reason, evidence and relevance (Jacks, 2010, p. 78). (**PRESENT**)
- **Rule 2:** Use **PRESENT** tense to report the findings of others when you are paraphrasing and quoting information from authors that you want to express a close allegiance to. Using past tense can suggest that information is no longer current or not so relevant to the writer's own research.

Examples

SOME COMMON REPORTING WORDS IN PRESENT TENSE FOR INCORPORATING AUTHOR NAMES

acknowledges, adds, admits, affirms, agrees, argues, asserts, assumes, assures, challenges, claims, clarifies, comments, concedes, concludes, declares, demonstrates, denies, describes, disagrees, discusses, doubts, elaborates, emphasises, explains, implies, infers, informs, maintains, mentions, notes, observes, points out, presents, proves, questions, reasons, recognises, refutes, relates, remarks, reports, requests, responds, reveals, shows, states, suggests, thinks, urges, warns

3. Using past tense in your writing

You use the **PAST** tense in academic writing to state facts, to make generalisations and to report the ideas of others that describe past events and research that is not continuing.

- **Rule 1:** Use **PAST** tense when you want to describe an action or event that took place in the past. This includes giving examples from practical experience, writing up the methods and results sections of scientific reports and writing descriptions and analyses of past events such as history and biography.

Example

- ✓ Critical thinking originated during the time of Socrates over 2500 years ago. After this, many contributions were made to the notion of critical thinking by European philosophers, such as Aquinas, Erasmus, Bacon and Moore. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, critical thinking and reading skills have been explicitly developed for educational purposes.
- **Rule 2:** Use **PAST** tense forms correctly by adding 'ed' to present tense verbs and reporting verbs or by using the correct 'irregular verb'. Be careful, spelling rules apply when adding 'ed' to words (e.g. doubling the last letter, dropping the final 'e').

Examples

SOME COMMON PAST TENSE IRREGULAR VERBS

(bring) brought, (come) came/had come (arise), arose/had arisen, (choose) chose/had chosen, (forbid) forbade/had forbidden, (lay) laid/had laid, (lie) lay/had lain, (lead) led/had led, (show) showed/had shown, (write) wrote/had written

4. Using future tense in your writing

Future tense can be used to express the writer's assumptions, speculations and predictions about the future after a situation has been analysed and considered in the light of evidence.

Example

- ✓ Researchers (Jackson, 2005; Smith, 1999; Zhan, 2002) state that it is likely that the study of critical thinking and reading skills will continue to play an important role in university education. (**FUTURE**)

5. Controlling shifts in verb tenses

When you are writing an essay, you will probably want to use time frames that require you to move between the tenses (e.g. inserting a scenario, an example or an anecdote to illustrate your point). You will need to be careful that you make shifts in tense clearly and consistently.

- **Rule: Keep your writing in the ONE tense (present or past) unless you consciously intend to change the time frame**

correct – present tense.

Example

wrong – needs present tense

correct – future tense

wrong – needs past tense

correct – last sentence needs future tense

Being critical in university writing does not have the same meaning as criticising in everyday life (i.e. making negative comments). Writing critically meant (means) that you question the information and opinions presented to you in your readings. By evaluating and judging the text from an informed point of view, you can make statements about the strengths and weaknesses of an argument. For instance, a text written about social justice in the 1920s may not consider the textual marginalisation of racial, social and gender groups as these issues are (were) not considered at this time. Moreover, in recent times the Internet has flooded the information market with dubious information. Therefore, students will need thorough training in critical reading skills so they can evaluate the quality of the information they are using in their academic assignments.