

### Controlling Shifts in Verb Tense

Writing often involves telling stories. Sometimes we narrate a story as our main purpose in writing; sometimes we include brief anecdotes or hypothetical scenarios as illustrations or reference points in an essay. Even an essay that does not explicitly tell a story involves implied time frames for the actions discussed and states described. **Changes in verb tense help readers understand the temporal relationships among various narrated events. But unnecessary or 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, which is usually either simple past or simple present. Even apparently non-narrative writing should employ verb tenses consistently and clearly.

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

#### Examples:

1. 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.

**Corrected:** The ocean **contains** rich minerals that **wash down** from rivers and streams.

2. 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.

**Corrected:** About noon the sky **darkened**, a breeze **sprang up**, and a low rumble **announced** the approaching storm.

3. 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.

**Corrected:** Yesterday we **walked** to school but later **rode** the bus home.

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

**Examples:**

1. 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.)

2. 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.)

3. Workers **are installing** extra loudspeakers because the music in 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.)

## Controlling Shifts in a Paragraph or Essay

**General guideline: Establish a primary tense for the main discourse, and use occasional shifts to other tenses to indicate changes in time frame.**

**Hints:**

- Rely on past tense to narrate events and to refer to an author or an author's ideas as historical entities (biographical information about a historical figure or narration of developments in an author's ideas over time).
- Use present tense to state facts, to refer to perpetual or habitual actions, and to discuss your own ideas or those expressed by an author in a particular work. Also use present tense to describe action in a literary work, movie, or other fictional narrative. Occasionally, for dramatic effect, you may wish to narrate an event in present tense as though it were happening now. If you do, use present tense consistently throughout the

## Verb Tense Consistency

PS-20

narrative, making shifts only where appropriate.

- Future action may be expressed in a variety of ways, including the use of *will*, *shall*, *is going to*, *are about to*, *tomorrow* and other adverbs of time, and a wide range of contextual cues.

## Using Other Tenses in Conjunction with Simple Tenses

It is not always easy (or especially helpful) to try to distinguish perfect and/or progressive tenses from simple ones in isolation, for example, the difference between simple past progressive ("She was eating an apple") and present perfect progressive ("She has been eating an apple"). Distinguishing these sentences in isolation is possible, but the differences between them make clear sense only in the context of other sentences since the time-distinctions suggested by different tenses are *relative* to the time frame implied by the verb tenses in surrounding sentences or clauses.

### Example 1: Simple past narration with perfect and progressive elements

On the day in question...

By the time Tom *noticed* the doorbell, it *had* already *rung* three times. As usual, he *had been listening* to loud music on his stereo. He *turned* the stereo *down* and *stood up* to answer the door. An old man *was standing* on the steps. The man *began* to speak slowly, asking for directions.

In this example, the progressive verbs *had been listening* and *was standing* suggest action underway at the time some other action took place. The stereo-listening was underway when the doorbell rang. The standing on the steps was underway when the door was opened. The past perfect progressive verb *had been listening* suggests action that began in the time frame prior to the main narrative time frame and that was still underway as another action began. If the primary narration is in the present tense, then the present progressive or present perfect progressive is used to indicate action that is or has been underway as some other action begins. This narrative style might be used to describe a scene from a novel, movie, or play, since action in fictional narratives is conventionally treated as always present. For example, we refer to the scene in *Hamlet* in which the prince first *speaks* (present) to the ghost of his dead father or the final scene in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, which *takes place* (present) the day after Mookie *has smashed* (present perfect) the pizzeria window. If the example narrative above were a scene in a play, movie, or novel, it might appear as follows.

### Example 2: Simple present narration with perfect and progressive elements

In this scene...

By the time Tom *notices* the doorbell, it *has* already *rung* three times. As usual, he *has been listening* to loud music on his stereo. He *turns* the stereo *down* and

## Verb Tense Consistency

PS-20

*stands up* to answer the door. An old man *is standing* on the steps. The man *begins* to speak slowly, asking for directions.

In this example as in the first one, the progressive verbs *has been listening* and *is standing* indicate action underway as some other action takes place. The present perfect progressive verb *has been listening* suggests action that began in the time frame prior to the main narrative time frame and that is still underway as another action begins. The remaining tense relationships parallel those in the first example.

In all of these cases, the progressive or *-ing* part of the verb merely indicates ongoing action, that is, action underway as another action occurs. The general comments about tense relationships apply to simple and perfect tenses, regardless of whether there is a progressive element involved.

It is possible to imagine a narrative based on a future time frame as well, for example, the predictions of a psychic or futurist. If the example narrative above were spoken by a psychic, it might appear as follows.

### **Example 3: Simple future narration with perfect and progressive elements**

Sometime in the future...

By the time Tom *notices* the doorbell, it *will have* already *rung* three times. As usual, he *will have been listening* to loud music on his stereo. He *will turn* the stereo *down* and *will stand up* to answer the door. An old man *will be standing* on the steps. The man *will begin* to speak slowly, asking for directions.

In this example as in the first two, the progressive verbs *will have been listening* and *will be standing* indicate ongoing action. The future perfect progressive verb *will have been listening* suggests action that will begin in the time frame prior to the main narrative time frame and that will still be underway when another action begins. The verb *notices* here is in present-tense form, but the rest of the sentence and the full context of the narrative cue us to understand that it refers to future time. The remaining tense relationships parallel those in the first two examples.

## **General guidelines for use of perfect tenses**

In general the use of perfect tenses is determined by their relationship to the tense of the primary narration. If the primary narration is in simple past, then action initiated before the time frame of the primary narration is described in past perfect. If the primary narration is in simple present, then action initiated before the time frame of the primary narration is described in present perfect. If the primary narration is in simple future, then action initiated before the time frame of the primary narration is described in future perfect.

**Past** primary narration corresponds to **Past Perfect** (*had* + past participle) for earlier time frames

**Present** primary narration corresponds to **Present Perfect** (*has* or *have* + past participle) for earlier time frames

## Verb Tense Consistency

PS-20

**Future** primary narration corresponds to **Future Perfect** (*will have* + past participle) for earlier time frames

The present perfect is also used to narrate action that began in real life in the past but is not completed, that is, may continue or may be repeated in the present or future. For example: "I *have run* in four marathons" (implication: "so far... I may run in others"). This usage is distinct from the simple past, which is used for action that was completed in the past without possible continuation or repetition in the present or future. For example: "Before injuring my leg, I *ran* in four marathons" (implication: "My injury prevents me from running in any more marathons").

Time-orienting words and phrases like *before*, *after*, *by the time*, and others--when used to relate two or more actions in time--can be good indicators of the need for a perfect-tense verb in a sentence.

By the time the Senator *finished* (past) his speech, the audience *had lost* (past perfect) interest.

By the time the Senator *finishes* (present: habitual action) his speech, the audience *has lost* (present perfect) interest.

By the time the Senator *finishes* (present: suggesting future time) his speech, the audience *will have lost* (future perfect) interest.

After everyone *had finished* (past perfect) the main course, we *offered* (past) our guests dessert.

After everyone *has finished* (present perfect) the main course, we *offer* (present: habitual action) our guests dessert.

After everyone *has finished* (present perfect) the main course, we *will offer* (future: specific one-time action) our guests dessert.

Long before the sun *rose* (past), the birds *had arrived* (past perfect) at the feeder.

Long before the sun *rises* (present: habitual action), the birds *have arrived* (present perfect) at the feeder.

Long before the sun *rises* (present: suggesting future time), the birds *will have arrived* (future perfect) at the feeder.

## Sample paragraphs

The main tense in this first sample is past. Tense shifts are inappropriate and are indicated in **bold**.

The gravel crunched and spattered beneath the wheels of the bus as it swung into the station. Outside the window, shadowy figures peered at the bus through the darkness. Somewhere in the crowd, two, maybe three, people were waiting for me: a woman, her son, and possibly her husband. I could not prevent my imagination from churning out a picture of them, the town, and the place I **will** soon call home. Hesitating a moment, I **rise** from my seat, these images flashing through my mind. (adapted from a narrative)

Inappropriate shifts from past to present, such as those that appear in the above paragraph,

## Verb Tense Consistency

## PS-20

are sometimes hard to resist. The writer becomes drawn into the narrative and begins to relive the event as an ongoing experience. The inconsistency should be avoided, however. In the sample, *will* should be *would*, and *rise* should be *rose*.

The main tense in this second sample is present. Tense shifts--all appropriate--are indicated in **bold**.

A dragonfly rests on a branch overhanging a small stream this July morning. It is newly emerged from brown nymphal skin. As a nymph, it **crept** over the rocks of the stream bottom, feeding first on protozoa and mites, then, as it **grew** larger, on the young of other aquatic insects. Now an adult, it **will feed** on flying insects and eventually **will mate**. The mature dragonfly is completely transformed from the drab creature that once **blended** with underwater sticks and leaves. Its head, thorax, and abdomen glitter; its wings are iridescent in the sunlight.  
(adapted from an article in the magazine Wilderness)

This writer uses the present tense to describe the appearance of a dragonfly on a particular July morning. However, both past and future tenses are called for when she refers to its previous actions and to its predictable activity in the future.

Exercises on verb tense consistency are available at  
[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g\\_tensecEX1.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_tensecEX1.html).

---

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

This page is located at [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g\\_tensec.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_tensec.html).

Copyright ©1995-2003 by OWL at Purdue University and Purdue University. All rights reserved.

Use of this site, including printing and distributing our handouts, constitutes acceptance of our terms and conditions of fair use, available at  
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/fairuse.html>.

To contact OWL, please visit our contact information page at  
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/contact.html> to find the right person to call or email.