

Goals

- To learn the importance of mastering verb tenses in writing
- To review two problems ESL writers commonly encounter with verb tenses
- To learn to form and use verb tenses correctly
- To develop confidence in using correct verb tenses through practice with exercises and writing assignments

Verb Tenses



A student helps a fellow classmate on orientation day at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
Photo courtesy of Publications Reprographics.

Think about and discuss the following question:

What are three ways that attending your campus's orientation can make you a better college student?

PART I**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT VERB-TENSE ERRORS****In Part I, you will learn**

- The definition of a verb-tense error
- The importance of using verb tenses correctly in writing
- **Suggestions for mastering verb tenses in writing**

Definition of the Error (vt*)

Verb tense refers to the time that a verb expresses. The form of the verb *ride* in the sentence *We rode our bicycles to campus* indicates that the time of the action of riding our bicycles was in the past, not in the present or the future. A verb-tense error (**vt**) may be one of two types: incorrect choice of a verb tense within a sentence or inappropriate shifting of verb tenses within a paragraph or group of paragraphs.

Errors marked verb tense (**vt**) may also relate to **aspect**. Aspect refers to some characteristic of an event or action beyond its time. For example, both of the following sentences describe actions that take place in the present. The difference is one of aspect: *Matt studies in the library in the evening* and *Matt is studying in the library this evening*. The verb in the first sentence shows a habitual action, whereas the verb in the second sentence shows a temporary action that is in progress right now.

There are also different aspects in past time as illustrated by the following sentences: *I was working on my essay yesterday* and *I worked on my essay yesterday*. While both sentences describe actions in past time, only the first sentence emphasizes the duration of the action.

The present perfect tense (and present perfect progressive) also shows aspect. In the sentence *Alicia has moved to a new apartment*, the act of moving has already occurred, but the use of the present perfect indicates that the action occurred close to the present time. In the sentence *Alicia moved to a new apartment*, the use of the past tense indicates that the moving occurred at a definite time in the past. Thus, both verbs (*has moved* and *moved*) show a completed past action, but only the first verb shows a close link to present time.

Importance of Mastering Verb Tenses in Writing

Verb-tense errors are global (more serious) errors and can make a piece of writing difficult for the reader to understand. Because time is an important message

*vt = grading symbol for an error in verb tense.

expressed by the verb in English, a writer must be able to control verb tenses in order for the reader to understand when actions and events take place. In addition, as explained above, you will need to control verb tenses in order to communicate other information such as duration (as opposed to the completion of an event in the past), as in *The phone was ringing when I arrived home* versus *The phone rang at 10 PM*. In sum, if you do not control verb tenses, your readers will have great difficulty following the sequence of events in your writing.

Suggestions for Mastering Verb Tenses in Writing

- Review the verb-tense chart in Part II of this unit to make sure you understand the uses of the 12 verb tenses in English. Make sure you carefully study the six most commonly used verb tenses in English. One of these is the present perfect tense, one of the most difficult tenses for ESL students to master. Other commonly used verb tenses are the simple present, present progressive, simple past, past progressive, and future.
- Remember that in English, even when you have a time word or phrase (such as *last week, tomorrow, or yesterday*) stated in a clause or sentence, the verb must also express time, as in the sentence *We went to the movies yesterday*.
- Be highly aware of how you move from one verb tense to another in a piece of writing (the sequencing of verbs). Avoid unnecessary shifts in tense, yet also be aware that you will often need to use several different verb tenses. The sample paragraphs in Parts II and III of this unit will guide you in using different verb tenses in a passage.
- Become aware of the variety of verb tenses that can occur in a piece of writing by examining the verb tenses in your academic, professional, and leisure-time reading material. Note that when a writer shifts to a different verb tense, this shift is often signaled by a time-reference word or phrase, such as *when I was in high school, yesterday, or tomorrow*. These words alert the reader to a shift from one time frame to another.

Test Your Understanding of Verb Tenses

Write answers to the following questions. Share your answers with another student.

1. Why are verb-tense errors such serious errors?
2. Aside from time, what other kinds of information do some verb tenses convey?

Grammar Journal Entry 1: Verb Tenses

Write a short entry in your grammar journal in response to the following questions.

1. Describe your week so far. What have you done? Overall, has this week been hectic, busy, routine, or slow?
2. Underline all of the verbs in this journal entry and notice what different verb tenses you have used. Do you think they are correct? If you are not sure, check with a classmate or your instructor.

PART II

COMMON PROBLEMS, SELF-HELP STRATEGIES, AND GRAMMAR GUIDELINES

In Part II, you will study

- Two problems ESL writers commonly encounter with verb tenses
- Grammar guidelines for verb tenses
- Self-help strategies for controlling verb tenses in your writing

This section presents two problems that ESL writers commonly encounter with verb tenses. First, take the pretest to see what you already know about verb tenses. In checking your answers, note that the pretest questions cover the same types of errors in the same order as the problems in this section. Then carefully study each problem and the examples that illustrate it, giving particular attention to those problems that correspond to the pretest questions you had difficulty with. Using the boxes to the left of each problem, check [✓] *yes*, *no*, or *don't know* to indicate to yourself which problems you should focus the most attention on in this unit and also when you write in English. Remember that becoming aware of the types of errors you most often make with verb tenses will increase your chances of avoiding these errors in your writing.

Pretest: What Do You Already Know About Verb Tenses?

Test your ability to recognize errors in verb tenses by finding and correcting the one verb-tense error in each of the following sentences.

Answers on p. 291

1. Since I moved to my new house 15 days ago, I was very busy.
2. Human beings make mistakes. Sometimes we did things we regretted.

Two Problems ESL Writers Commonly Encounter with Verb Tenses

yes no don't know **PROBLEM 1**

An incorrect verb tense has been used in a sentence or clause.

vt

Incorrect: Alex has sent out several job applications last month.

Correct: Alex sent out several job applications last month.

Explanation: The action of sending out the applications has been completed. Thus, the simple past tense is needed.

vt

Incorrect: I was in the United States since 1985.

Correct: I have been in the United States since 1985.

Explanation: The action of being in the United States started in the past and is continuing into the present. Thus, the present perfect tense is needed.

vt

Incorrect: At the moment I live in the dormitory, but I decided to move into an apartment next year.

Correct: At the moment I live in the dormitory, but I have decided to move into an apartment next year.

Explanation: In some contexts, the simple past tense would be correct; however, since no definite time has been given and since the decision to move into an apartment has probably been recently made, the present perfect tense is needed.

vt

Incorrect: Students pay less tuition last year than this year.

Correct: Students paid less tuition last year than this year.

Explanation: Less tuition was paid by students last year. Thus, a past-tense verb is needed to agree with the time expression *last year*.

vt

Incorrect: Yosemite Park was one of the most popular of all the national parks.

Correct: Yosemite Park is one of the most popular of all the national parks.

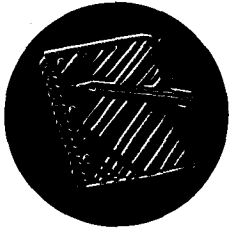
Explanation: The comment about Yosemite Park is a general statement that is true in the present. Thus, the present tense is needed.

vt

Incorrect: Many students participate in the commencement ceremony next month.

Correct: Many students will participate (or are participating) in the commencement ceremony next month.

Explanation: The commencement will take place next month. Thus, a verb that shows future time is needed to agree with the time expression *next month*.



Self-Help Strategy: Make sure that the verb tense you use fits the time you want to express. For example, if you are writing about something that will happen in the future, the verb should express future time. Also, remember that even when the time is indicated with a time word, such as *yesterday*, *today*, or *tomorrow*, the verb must still show the time of the action. When the time is not explicitly stated, think carefully about the time you are trying to express. In the following sentence, the time is not stated in words, yet the writer is remembering a past action **now**. Thus, the verb *remember* is in the present tense even though the verb *had* and *went* are in the past tense.

[right now] [past] [past]

Example: I remember the fun we had when we all went to Disneyland.

yes no don't know

PROBLEM 2

☐ ☐ ☐ The verb tenses within a piece of writing (the sequence of verb tenses) shift inappropriately from one time frame to another.

Incorrect: Although this is my first year in college, I have already found that there ^{vt}were some differences between high school and college. One of the things I ^{vt}learned in college is that a person has to be independent.

Explanation: Since the writer is in his or her first year of college, he or she appropriately started out in the present time frame (*is, have found*). However, the writer then inappropriately shifts to the past (*were, learned*) instead of staying in the present.

Correct: Although this is my first year in college, I have already found that there are some differences between high school and college. One of the things I have learned in college is that a person has to be independent.

Incorrect: Most students have many expectations and ideas about college before they actually enter. Some of these expectations are similar to reality, yet some are quite different. Before I started college, I ^{vt}have imagined how the classes and teachers would be and came to the conclusion that they ^{vt}will not be any different from those in high school.

Explanation: The writer appropriately begins in the present with two general statements. However, the writer needs to shift to the past when writing about an experience that took place before she started college.

Correct: Most students have many different expectations and ideas about college before they actually enter. Some of these expectations are similar to reality, yet some are quite different. Before I started college, I imagined how the classes and teachers would be and came to the conclusion that they would not be any different from those in high school.

FUTURE PERFECT PROGRESSIVE, cont.

Formation

will + have + been + present participle

Examples: I will have been practicing, you will have been practicing,
he/she/the student will have been practicing, they/the students
will have been practicing

Guidelines for Correct Verb-Tense Sequencing

Verb-tense sequencing refers to the way a writer can move from one verb tense to another in a piece of writing. Being able to move appropriately from one verb tense to another in a piece of writing is crucial for writers and is one of the most important keys to using verb tenses correctly.

Sometimes a shift in verb tenses is appropriate and sometimes it is not, as illustrated in paragraphs A and B below. In paragraph A, the underlined verb *were* shows a shift in verb tense from present to past. This shift to the past is **not** appropriate, because the writer is still commenting in general about men in his country. The writer thinks that these men are generally wrong in their opinion. **General statements that are true in the present require the simple present tense**, so the writer should stay in the present tense by using the verb *are* instead of *were*.

A. Many men in my country do not encourage their wives to work outside the home because they think women should not do anything but housework and child care. However, these men were wrong. They will never know what their wives can do or who their wives might become.

In paragraph B, the underlined verbs also show a shift from the present to the past. However, here, the shift to the past tense is appropriate because the writer shifts from a discussion of what is true in the present to a discussion of what it was like **before** personal computers became common. Shifting into the past tense is necessary in this situation to make the comparison between present and past.

B. Personal computers have become very important tools in both homes and offices. At home, people use them for everything from writing letters to keeping records of their monthly budgets or for doing their income taxes. In the workplace, computers are used for word processing, sending messages, computer-aided design, writing software, locating reference material, and doing numerous other tasks. Before homes and offices had personal computers, individuals had to type and retype drafts of letters and other material. Engineers and others had to draft and design using pens, paper, and drawing boards. Students, researchers, and librarians had to search for reference materials manually. Producing and locating all this material took

much longer in those days than it does now. From writing to designing to communicating, computers have made our lives easier in both the home and the workplace.

Always keep in mind that, as a writer, you will usually use several different verb tenses in a piece of writing. Also, you will sometimes have the option of choosing between verb tenses, with this choice creating little difference in meaning. The two passages that follow, along with the notes below each one, will show you how various verb tenses can work together in sequence in a text. The first passage uses more verbs in the present time frame, while the second passage uses more verbs in the past time frame.

Passage 1

The following passage begins and ends in the present tense because the writer is presenting current facts about some of the benefits of television watching.

However, the writer, who is a teacher, can also look back to the past or show actions that were true in the past yet are still true in the present by choosing appropriate verb tenses throughout the passage. The passage has been divided into eight parts. An explanation of the sequence of tenses the writer has chosen to use is at the end of the passage.

(1) Although television has long been deplored by parents as a waste of their children's time, well-informed college students in the 1990s view television as a supplementary source of knowledge inside and outside their classes. (2) Television has affected their lives ever since they were small. (3) Students who want to be up to date keep up with the news—via television. Not only can they choose from among a wealth of broadcasts, including Headline News, CNN, and the major networks, but also television news offers facts and the pictures to illustrate those facts, giving a three-dimensional impact to the news that a newspaper or *Newsweek* cannot surpass. (4) During the last big earthquake, it was not until I turned on CNN that I understood the full impact of the LA earthquake, even though I had heard about it on the radio. Seeing cars dangling over a precipice where a freeway had been or a closeup of a first-floor apartment that the earthquake had reduced to 18 inches brought it home in a way that its size, 6.6 on the Richter scale, could not. (5) Of course, I am a regular reader of the newspapers, but I depend on television for a "live" dimension that newspapers and magazines cannot offer. Good students in the 1990s are no different from me: They rely on television as an informant. (6) As a teacher, I have added television to the classroom since 1985 for the same reason that I watch it: its visual impact. (7) In an English 1 class, for example, I once showed a video clip of Martin Luther King's presentation when we were studying his speech "I Have a Dream." Seeing thousands of African Americans on the Washington Mall absorbing King's every word made the whole speech come alive for all of us in the room. I even noticed that some students were moved to

tears as they watched, which clearly indicated their interest in the broadcast. (8) Because television can offer so much, good students value it as information technology, use it wisely, and, by watching it, keep themselves informed, both factually and pictorially.

Notes on Verb-Tense Sequencing in Passage 1

- Part (1): The writer starts with the present perfect tense in the passive voice (*has been deplored*) to show that over a period of time starting in the past and continuing into the present, parents have not approved of their children's watching television. She then shifts to the present tense (*view*) to state a current fact about the way college students view television watching.
- Part (2): The writer uses the present perfect tense (*has affected*) to show that the effect began in the past and is continuing in the present. The writer then shifts to the simple past tense (*were*) in referring to the students when they were children, because they are no longer children.
- Part (3): The writer uses all simple present-tense verbs in this part because she is making statements that are generally true in the present.
- Part (4): The writer shifts to past time in this part because she is referring to an example (the Los Angeles earthquake) that occurred in the past. In this part, the writer uses both the simple past tense (*was not, turned on, understood, brought, could not*) and the past perfect tense (*had heard, had been, had reduced*). The verbs in the past perfect tense indicate actions and events that happened in the past before the time the writer turned on the television set to watch the news on the earthquake. In other words, the earthquake had already occurred when the writer began to watch TV news about it.
- Part (5): The writer shifts back to the simple present tense (*am, depend, cannot offer, rely*) in this part because she is finished with her example about the Los Angeles earthquake and, just as she did in part (3), is now making general statements that are true in the present about herself and about students.
- Part (6): The writer uses the present perfect tense (*have added*) to show that beginning in the past and continuing into the present, she has added television to her classroom. She shifts to the simple present tense (*watch*) to show that she generally watches TV in the present.
- Part (7): The writer shifts to past time because she is referring to an example (her experience teaching an English 1 course) that occurred in the past. In this part, the writer uses mostly the simple past tense (*showed, noticed, were moved* [passive voice], *watched, indicated*) to show that these actions and events happened in the past and are finished. However, she also uses the past progressive tense (*were studying*) to empha-

size the duration of time—that the action of studying Martin Luther King's speech went on over a period of time in her class—in contrast to a single moment in time when she showed the video clip.

Part (8): The writer shifts back to the simple present tense (*can offer, value, use, keep*) to conclude with statements that are generally true in present time.

Passage 2

The following passage is an essay introduction in which the writer summarizes an article by Eudora Welty before going on to write the essay, which is based on the Welty article. **The majority of verbs are in past time because they refer to Welty's experience in the past.** But we can see that the writer also sometimes uses the present tense and present perfect tense in this summary. In this passage, three verb tenses are used: the simple present, the simple past, and the present perfect. An explanation of why the writer uses these three tenses together in this paragraph is given at the end of the passage.

In her article, "Listening," Eudora Welty tells how she became committed to reading and writing through listening. Welty was first introduced to the world of books when she was three years old. She reports that her mother read to her all day long, in every room of the house. Not only did she develop a love of books because of her mother's reading to her but she also learned to listen to what she heard and what she read. She says, "Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear." She feels that her ability to listen to words has influenced her in her desire to write and her ability to write, as she has "always trusted this voice." Although Welty does not say it directly, it is clear that her mother served as an excellent role model because she taught her the love of reading.

Notes on Verb-Tense Sequencing in Passage 2

Simple Present Verbs (*tells, reports, says, feels, does not say, is*)

The writer uses the simple present tense in this passage to refer to what Eudora Welty says in her article. Even though Welty wrote the article in the past, it is common to use the simple present tense when using verbs that refer to what an author has written in an article. In other words, Welty *tells, reports, and says* or *does not say* certain things in her article that the author wants to refer to in the summary. Note that the writer could have chosen to use simple past tense for all of these verbs. But the writer must be consistent and put **all** of the verbs referring to what an author says or writes in an article either in the present or in the past.

The verbs *feels* and *is* are also in the simple present tense. The verb *feel* is in the simple present because the writer is stating a current fact about how Welty feels in general at the present time about the effects of reading on her writing. The verb *is* is in the simple present because it refers to something that is clear to the writer now in the present.

Simple Past Verbs (*was introduced, was, did she develop, learned, heard, read, was read to, started, didn't hear, served, taught*)

The majority of the verbs in the passage are in the simple past tense because the writer is referring to Welty's childhood experience in which she was read to by her mother. This experience happened in the past and is finished as Welty is no longer a child now.

Present Perfect Verbs (*has influenced, has trusted*)

The writer uses the present perfect form of these two verbs to show that these actions occur over a period of time beginning in the past and continuing into the present. In other words, Welty, beginning in the past and up to the present time, has been influenced by her ability to listen to words and has trusted the voice inside her.

Improve Your Writing Style

Choose the most appropriate verb tense when the time reference of two verb tenses is similar yet not exactly the same.

Writers often have a choice of verb tenses that are similar but not exactly the same in meaning. Sometimes you may want to choose one tense over another for a specific reason. At other times, you may have options, with your choice of tense creating little difference in meaning. For you, as advanced writers, what is important is to be aware of the differences that can be created by the use of one verb tense over another. The sentences that follow illustrate some of the differences you should become aware of. Note differences both in time reference and in any other information each verb in the pairs of sentences that follow expresses.

1a. We decided to go to the movies. (simple past tense)

1b. We have decided to go to the movies. (present perfect tense)

Explanation of difference: In both sentences above, the decision to go to the movies has already been made. The difference is that the use of the present perfect tense in sentence 1b makes it clear that the decision was made close to the present time; that is, the decision has either just been made or has been made recently. Also, with sentence 1a, the meaning could be that *we decided to go to the movies and already went*; whereas in sentence 1b, the action of going to the movies has not yet been completed.

2a. It rained yesterday. (simple past tense)

2b. It was raining yesterday. (past progressive tense)

IMPROVE YOUR WRITING STYLE, cont.

Explanation of difference: In both sentences 2a and 2b, the event happened in past time. However, the use of the past progressive tense *was raining* in sentence 2b emphasizes the duration of time that it rained yesterday. The past progressive verb gives the impression that it rained over a period of time yesterday. In sentence 2a, in contrast, the verb in the simple past tense does not indicate whether or not it rained briefly or over a period of time. A time reference word, such as *all day* (*It rained all day*) or *briefly* (*It rained briefly*) would have to be used with the verb to indicate the length of duration.

3a. We had eaten when you came over to visit. (past perfect tense)

3b. We ate when you came over to visit. (past tense)

4a. We had eaten before you came over to visit. (past perfect tense)

4b. We ate before you came over to visit. (past tense)

Explanation of difference: In sentences 3a and 3b, the time that the eating took place in relation to the action of coming over to visit is different. In sentence 3a, the past perfect tense indicates that the action of eating had already happened before the action of coming over to visit. In sentence 3b, in contrast, the action of eating occurred at the same time or even slightly after the action of coming over happened. Note, however, that in sentences 4a and 4b, the action of eating in both cases was finished before the action of coming over to visit happened. The subordinating conjunction *before* in sentences 4a and 4b clearly indicates that the action of eating comes first in both cases.

5a. I am studying in the library. (present progressive tense)

5b. I study in the library. (simple present tense)

Explanation of difference: Notice that although both verbs are in present time, the exact meaning conveyed by each verb is different. In sentence 5a, the use of the present progressive tense shows that the action of studying is happening either exactly at the moment of speaking or for a period of time in the present that the writer considers temporary. In other words, sentence 5a could mean that the studying in the library is happening right now or for a period of time in the present—for example, *this week*—that is considered temporary and finite. In sentence 5b, in contrast, the use of the simple present tense indicates that the action of studying in the library is something that is done on a regular basis as a habit, for example *every night*.