



Tenses without the Tension

Tense relates to the verb in a sentence which refers to an action. It places the action in a time frame: past, present, or future. For example, in the following sentences the words in **bold** are verbs:

- *The students attend lectures every day.* (Present)
- *He wrote an impressive literature review.* (Past)
- *She will complete her degree next year.* (Future)

In academic writing it may, in certain contexts, be OK to use either the past or present tense. Even if the work you're discussing took place in the past, the ideas may be current, so the present tense can be acceptable. For example

- *The author **stated** that the results **confirmed** his first assumptions. OR*
- *The author **states** that the results **confirm** his first assumptions.*

It's important to be consistent and not mix tenses inappropriately, so when you're proofreading your work pay particular attention to this.

The general guideline is to change from one tense to another only if the time frame for each action changes. In the following paragraph note how the tenses (**in bold**) match the shift in the time expressions (underlined).

- *Last night the Aotearoa party **elected** Mr Kean as its new candidate for Hamilton. He is currently a member of the Invercargill City Council and **has been voted** in three times since 2002. He **will relocate** to Hamilton later next month where he **will begin campaigning** for the November elections. His wife and three **children will remain** in Invercargill until the end of the school year.*

Sometimes the present tense is used to describe events in the past to create a sense of immediacy. The 'historical present' can be used to discuss works of literature, art, or historical events, as the ideas they represent are ongoing.

For example:

- *Fontane **uses** the image of the swing to represent life's ups and downs.*
- *Van Gogh **depicts** his love of southern France in many of his paintings.*

The present tense can also be used for historical events, providing it makes sense in the context in which you're writing. For example:

- *In 1893, New Zealand **leads** the rest of the world when it introduces the right for women to vote.*

However, in the three examples above the past tense is also appropriate—the point is to be consistent.

When reporting research results, the following tenses are commonly used:

Past tense for procedures of *your* study:

- *Thirty participants **were interviewed** about their sleeping habits. The frequency of the dreams they remembered **was also noted**.*

Past tense when reporting your research results:

- *Seventy five percent of the participants **ranked** the second face as the most friendly.*

Present tense for results of other studies:

- *Schmidt (2008) **specifies** that early intervention is critical for children who have autism.*

Present tense for accepted knowledge:

- *Vitamin C is needed for the growth and repair of tissues in all parts of the body.*

Note that there are times when you can mix tense:

- *Featherston (2002) **highlighted** the use of alliteration in Muckle’s last anthology. However, recent literary critics **consider** this focus too narrow for the collection of poems.*

The following table sets out the most common tense forms:

Tense	Example
Simple Present	The company values its shareholders.
Present Progressive	He is writing an article for next month’s journal.
Simple Past	Last year the company made a profit.
Past Progressive	She was working there before it closed down.
Simple Present Perfect	He has never been employed.
Present Perfect Progressive	She has been studying for 5 years.
Simple Past Perfect	He had already worked for the company before.
Future	This strategy will work. They are going to study in the library.