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Get The Tense Right: Secrets of Verb Tense in Academic Writing

Explanation

Tense refers to the form a verb takes in a sentence, whether to express the present, past or future.

Simple Tenses

Present

The present tense indicates that an action is taking place at the time you express it, or an action that occurs regularly.

- We *wear* organic cotton shirts [an action taking place when it is expressed].
- I *watch* the documentary on PBS each Sunday night [an action that occurs regularly].

Past

The past tense indicates that an action is completed and has already taken place.

- Martin Luther King, Jr. *gave* his most famous speech in 1963 [an action completed in the past].
- As a girl, she *wondered* how her college degree would help her career [an action that occurred once or many times in the past but did not extend to the present].

Future

The future tense indicates that an action will or is likely to take place.

- Later today I *will do* the dishes [a future action that will definitely occur].
- The defendant probably *will plead* innocent [a future action that is likely to occur].

Directions:

Write an interesting, informative sentence that uses the correct simple tense verb. Include time info that gives readers clues to the tense: Tell us what time you are describing. Is it today, regularly, yesterday, last week, tomorrow, or next year?

Simple Present:

Simple Past:

Simple Future:

Perfect Tenses

Perfect tenses designate actions that were or will be completed before other actions. You can form the perfect tenses with the appropriate tense form of the helping (auxiliary) verb, *have*, plus the past participle.

Present perfect

The present perfect tense indicates that an action happened in the past but continues until the present time or is connected to the present time.

- We *have worn* organic cotton shirts [an action that began in the past and is finished at the present].
- She *has donated* extensively to UNICEF [an action that began in the past and extends into the present].

Past perfect

The past perfect tense indicates an action occurring before a certain time in the past.

- By 1995, Doctor Harvey *had built* the first artificial brain.

Future perfect

The future perfect tense indicates that an action will be finished by a certain time.

- By Thursday, the President *will have apologized* for his mistake.

Directions:

Write a sentence that uses the correct perfect tense verb in a sentence. Include time info that gives readers clues to tense: Tell us what time you are describing. Is it a certain year, yesterday, last week, tomorrow, or next year?

Present Perfect:

Past Perfect:

Future Perfect:

Progressive Tenses

The progressive tenses express continuing action. You can form them with the appropriate tense of the verb "be" plus the present participle.

Present progressive

The present progressive tense indicates that something is happening at the time you express it.

- The worker *is hammering*, and her foreman *is watching* lazily.

Past progressive

The past progressive tense indicates two kinds of past action.

- Poe's writing *was becoming* increasingly bizarre and dark [a continuing action in the past].
- The mob tackled Jean-Luc Goddard while he *was introducing* the film [an action occurring at the same time in the past as another action].

Future progressive

The future progressive tense indicates a continuing in the future.

- The government *will be monitoring* the phones in the lab.

Present perfect progressive

The present perfect progressive tense indicates action continuing from the past into the present and possibly into the future.

- The teacher *has been grading* since yesterday afternoon.

Past perfect progressive

The past perfect progressive tense indicates that a past action went on until another occurred.

- Before her promotion, Nico *had been working* on restoring open space on campus.

Future perfect progressive

The future perfect progressive tense indicates that an action will continue until a certain future time.

- On Tuesday I *will have been working* on this paper for six weeks.

Adapted from The Brief Holt Handbook, Fourth Edition, Kirsner & Mandell, 2004.

Practice with Simple Past Tense (*Spelling Rules for Regular Past Tense Verbs are listed at the end of this DLA packet.)

Fill in each blank with the correct past tense form of the verb provided.

Example:

PLAY We played dodgeball all afternoon.

FRY 1. We _____ the fish we caught in the lake.

STUDY 2. All of us _____ hard for the physics exam.

CRY 3. Mary _____ on his shoulder all through the movie.

MARRY 4. She _____ him on Tuesday and played slots that night.

TRY 5. Fred _____ to get in the concert by posing as a security guard.

SHOP 6. I _____ for all of my birthday presents at the art fair.

ADMIT 7. No one _____ that he was tired.

PLAN 8. Marty and Isabel _____ their marriage simply and loosely.

TERRIFY 9. The fireworks_____the younger children.

COMPILE 10. The assistants_____the materials into a great handbook.

Practice with Simple Past Tense

In each of the following sentences, underline any verbs that should have –ed or –d endings and supply the missing letters. Watch for time expressions (last week, yesterday, years ago) that indicate past time.

incorrect: The committee vote to adjourn yesterday.
correct: The committee voted to adjourn yesterday.

1. The driver ask for the exact fare last week.

2. Oliver use to live in Berkeley when he was a college student.

3. Katerina studied all the time and so she graduate from college last year.

4. College students are suppose to attend every class meeting.

5. Last Sunday, Laura listen to the drummers in the park.

6. Until I started school, I work twenty hours per week and study the rest of the time.

7. Finally Gayle's cat return home.

8. Several years ago I witness a crime and identify the criminal.

Adapted from Fog City Fundamentals, Fourth Edition, Altman & Deicke, 1998.

Practice with Perfect Tenses

Use the perfect tense to fill in the blank using the same time period (past, present, future) as the sample.

Example: Joan licks the popsicle. (present tense)

Joan has licked the popsicle. (present perfect tense)

(Remember: Perfect tenses for the verb *to run* are:

Present: she *has run*

Past: she *had run*

Future: she *will have run*)

1. Eric took piano lessons.

Eric _____ piano lessons since he was ten years old.

2. Bill, on the other hand, will join the Coast Guard.

Bill, on the other hand, _____ the Coast Guard.

3. Alyssa gives a drawing to each of her friends.

Alyssa _____ a drawing to each of her friends.

4. Chickens pecked at bugs and fruit in the garden.

Chickens _____ at bugs and fruit in the garden.

5. Each egg will travel a thousand miles before it lands on her lap.

Each egg _____ a thousand miles before it lands on her lap.

6. The wings had plenty of room to spread.

The wings _____ plenty of room to spread.

7. Madison collects the hay in the morning after breakfast.

Madison _____ the hay in the morning after breakfast.

Practice with Progressive Tenses

In the following sentences, change the simple tense verbs to progressive tense verbs using the same time period (present, past, future). Avoid the perfect tense for this exercise.

Example: Martians land on the planet Earth. (present)

Martians are landing on the planet Earth. (present progressive)

(Remember: Progresssive tenses for the verb *to run* are:

Present: she *is running*

Past: she *was running*

Future: she *will be running*)

1. Ferdinand scuffed when his friends all left for college.

Ferdinand _____ when his friends all left for college.

2. He enjoys his flowers, vegetables and herbs.

He _____ his flowers, vegetables and herbs.

3. The pumpkins ripened too long last year.

The pumpkins _____ too long last year.

4. His friends will call at the next holiday or break.

His friends _____ at the next holiday or break.

5. Ferdinand answers the phone saying "What?"

Ferdinand _____ the phone saying "What?"

6. He screened his calls last week to avoid bill collectors.

He _____ his calls last week to avoid bill collectors.

7. His money goes under his mattress until he needs it.

His money _____ under his mattress until he needs it.

8. He will go fishing next week if he gets his license.

He _____ next week if he gets his license.

*Spelling Rules for Regular Past Tense Verbs

1. Add *-ed* to the base form of most verbs

start	started
finish	finished
wash	washed

2. Add only *-d* when the base form ends in an *e*.

live	lived
care	cared
die	died

3. If the verb ends in a consonant + *y*, change the *y* to *i* and add *-ed*

dry	dried
carry	carried
spy	spied

4. If the verb ends in a vowel + *y*, do not change the *y*. Just add *-ed*

pray	prayed
stay	stayed
destroy	destroyed

5. If the verb has one syllable and ends in a consonant + vowel + consonant (CVC), double the final consonant and add *-ed*.

stop	stopped
rob	robbed
beg	begged

6. Do not double final *w* or *x*.

sew	sewed
mix	mixed

7. If the verb has two syllables, and the final syllable is stressed, double the final consonant.

ad mit'	admitted
oc cur'	occurred
per mit'	permitted

8. If the verb has two syllables, and the final syllable is *not* stressed, do *not* double the final consonant.

hap' pen	happened
lis' ten	listened
o' pen	opened