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 rinse the dishes [a future action that will definitely occur].
• The defendant probably will plead innocent [a future action that is likely to occur].

Practice #1:

Directions:
Write an interesting, informative sentence that uses the correct simple tense verb. Include time info that gives readers clues to tense:

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, or 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.

Practice #2:
Directions:
Write a sentence that uses the correct perfect tense verb in a sentence. Include time info that gives readers clues to tense:

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.

Practice #3 – Simple Past Tense
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 #4 – 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.

Practice #5 – 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. Tara raises as many children as she can.
Tara ________________ as many children as she can.

3. Bill, on the other hand, will join the Coast Guard.
Bill, on the other hand, ________________ the Coast Guard.

4. Alyssa gives a drawing to each of her friends.
Alyssa ________________ a drawing to each of her friends.

5. Chickens pecked at bugs and fruit in the garden.
Chickens ________________ at bugs and fruit in the garden.

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

7. The wings had plenty of room to spread.
The wings ________________ plenty of room to spread.

8. Madison collects the hay in the morning after breakfast.
Madison ________________ the hay in the morning after breakfast.
Practice #6 – 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: Progressive tenses for the verb to run are:
   Present: she is running
   Past: she was running
   Future: she will be running)

1. Ferdinand scoffed 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.