

# feeling comfortable with verb tenses

No. 50 in the Writing Center Handout Series

Here are some of the "how-to's" of using verb tenses.

**Being consistent** More important than remembering the "correct" tense for a particular kind of paper is remembering to use the chosen tense consistently. The logic of an argument depends on the logic of syntax, so even if you're uncertain of the appropriateness of a particular tense, if you're consistent, readers will be able to follow your train of thought.

**With one tense** In literature, even if one scene happens long after another, discuss both in present tense.

**Example (inconsistent):** *The other men thought Yossarian was crazy because he no longer wanted to wear his uniform. Yossarian, however, is perhaps the sanest member of the group.*

Was Yossarian sane when the other men thought he was crazy? The difference in tenses separates these two ideas, leaving a gap in time and therefore in information.

**Example (consistent):** *The other men think Yossarian is crazy because he no longer wants to wear his uniform. Yossarian, however, is perhaps the sanest member of the group.*

Present tense in both sentences indicates that Yossarian is sane *while* the other men think he is crazy.

**With multiple tenses** Sometimes a paper requires reference to past or future events while discussing a subject in the present. The key to maintaining consistency in these cases is to return to one tense as the point of reference.

**Example:** *Written and spoken evidence supported the idea that American colonists and the citizens of Great Britain held similar views on the importance of liberty and governmental representation.*

If the writer means that evidence in Colonial times supported those views, this consistent past tense is fine. If, however, evidence *still* supports those ideas, the verb tense should indicate that.

**Example:** *Written and spoken evidence supports the idea that American colonists and the citizens of Great Britain held similar views on the importance of liberty and governmental representation.*

In this version, the colonists and citizens are still part of history (past tense), but the evidence discussed is relevant today (present tense).

**Checking for consistency** Awkward syntax may tempt you to forego consistency in verb tense. The following elements of a paper are good places to spot check for tense confusion:

- **Passive voice.** Inverting subject and verb can be confusing. When you notice passive voice in your own work, double check that the helping verb is in the tense you intend to use. (See *The St. Martin's Handbook pp. 632-33 for information on passive voice.*)

**Example:** *Her application is/ was being processed.*

The meaning of the sentence depends on the tense of "to be."

- **Quoting the text.** The quote you want to use may not be in the same tense as your paper, but make sure to introduce the quote in the tense in which you are writing.

**Example:** *These material earnings are not what she genuinely desires. The narrator ultimately claims, "Her success excited, dated, and then bored her...the poor woman herself was yawning in spirit" (503).*

Even though the quote is in the past tense, the phrase leading into it is consistent in tense (present) with previous sentences. This logic helps for the same reason that present tense is always used to discuss literary works; the narrator *claims*, just as this character *desires*.

- **Discussing the world outside the text.** Reflecting on the text or discussing events that happened before the opening or will happen after the end require mixed tenses, which can be confusing. Double check that you discuss events in these categories in their appropriate time frame.

**Example:** *I wonder how many of these sources Smiley used in order to give her story more authenticity.*

We are with the essay-writers, wondering in the present not about Smiley's text but the process Smiley used to write it. In other words, we are in the present wondering about something that already happened.

*If you're still uncomfortable with verb tenses, you may want to review definitions of each tense (see other side for sources). Then you'll have an easier time selecting the forms of verbs that allow you to be consistent and therefore clear in your writing.*



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

MCCAIN G-13  
(404) 471-8242