Verb Tenses Made Easy

Verb tenses are changed to indicate whether an action happened in the present, the past, or the future. There are six verb tenses used in English: three simple tenses and three perfect tenses.

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The Simple Tenses

The simple tenses, including the (progressives), indicate the relationship between the time the action is taking place and the time when the sentence describing that action is being spoken or written. For example:

Present Tense: He reads (is reading) the book.
(He is reading the book at this very moment.)

Past Tense: He read (was reading) the book.
(He read the book prior to this moment.)

Future Tense: He will read (will be reading) the book.
(He will read the book at some point in the future.)

Note: The present tense is sometimes used to show time/action relationships which are not simple present. For example:

*Habitual Action
Actions which are habitual or routine: He works in the library.

*Historical Present
Actions that happened in the past, but are placed in present tense in order to make them more realistic for readers and listeners: Julius Caesar leads the army.

*Future
Actions which indicate future time: My flight leaves this evening.

The Perfect Tenses

The perfect tenses use a specific time as a point of reference and indicate that the action was completed, or perfected, prior to that time. Note that the perfect tenses use the auxiliary (helping) verb 'to have'. For example:

Present Perfect Tense: He has read the book.
(He finished reading the book prior to this moment.)
Past Perfect (Pluperfect) Tense: He had read the book by that time. (He finished reading the book prior to a specified time in the past.)

Future Perfect: He will have read the book by that time. (He will finish reading the book prior to a specified time in the future.)

Verb Tenses in Academic Writing

What verb tense should I use?
Students should use past tense whenever possible in formal academic writing. However, there are a few circumstances in which students may be required to use other tenses. One of these is a Response Paper, where students offer their personal analysis of an assigned reading. Another would be a Literature Paper, where events from the work are described in present tense to convey the idea that "the author is communicating to a present reader in the present time" (Ryan 68).

How do I know whether to use a simple or a perfect tense?
If you are describing actions which are not necessarily being completed or actions which may be ongoing or habitual, then you will need to use one of the simple tenses. If you are describing an action that was or will be completed at a specific time, you will need to use one of the perfect tenses.

Can I switch verb tenses?
Students should always be consistent with verb tenses, especially when distinguishing between actions which are ongoing and those which have been completed. Students writing in the historical present tense should be especially careful with verb tenses; shifting between the historical present tense and past tense when describing a specific event may cause confusion for readers or listeners.