

A Quick Reference from Writing Support Services

<http://www.cuw.edu/Tools/resources/lrc/writingcenter/grammar.html>

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.

Simple Tenses	Perfect Tenses
Present & (Present Progressive)	Present Perfect
Past & (Past Progressive) known as Pluperfect)	Past Perfect (also
Future & (Future Progressive)	Future Perfect

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 ? 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.
