Using tenses in essays

Thinking about the use of tense in your writing

Differences between written and spoken English

The Present Tense:

Present Simple is used for ...
General statements that are true for today, yesterday and tomorrow:
- Australians speak English.
- I don’t eat meat.

Habitual actions:
- The train is often late.

Present Progressive (or Continuous) is used for ...
Actions that are current and temporary, and ongoing around the present time:
- It’s spring now. The days are getting warmer.
- I can’t answer the phone now, I’m having a shower.

Present Perfect is used for ...
Actions that started in the past and have not finished (link to now – have a present result):
- I have lived in Melbourne for 2 years. (I still live here)

When the time period has not finished:
- I have seen three movies this week.
  (This week is not finished)

When the time is not important, but the result is:
- He has failed his exam. (It does not matter when)

Experiences with no specified time:
- I have been to Paris. (sometime in my life)

Exceptions to note in the use of the present tense:
1. Some verbs rarely, if ever, use the present progressive tense:
   Mental and emotional states: believe, hate, know, like, love, prefer, think, understand, want (e.g. Not ‘I am wanting to meet you.’)
   Senses: hear, see, smell, taste.
   Appearance: appear, look, seem
   Possession: belong, have, own, possess
   Inclusion: comprise, consist, contain, include, involve
2. Present tenses are frequently used to express the future (See ‘Other ways of expressing the future’ in this flyer.)

Present tense in essays

In essays, use present tense to:
- Make generalisations about your topic or other authors’ views:
  Two artefacts provide insight into ancient Hindu culture.
  Marxist historians argue that class conflicts shape political affairs.
- Cite an author or to refer to what an author says (even if the author is dead):
  Shakespeare depicts the fight for Troy as a war without glory.
  Pauli’s exclusion principle states that no two electrons can have the same four quantum numbers.
- Present your interpretations (opinions) and the interpretations of others:
  The “White Australia Policy”, which ended in 1973, represents one of the darkest periods of European settlement in Australia.
- Describe events in fiction or films:
  In the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Aragon encounters numerous misfortunes throughout his travels.
  In the Iliad, finally the gods freely intervene on behalf of both the Trojans and the Greeks.
- Describe an idea or fact that is always true:
  Genetic information is encoded in DNA.
Use present perfect to describe an event in the text previous to main event you are describing.

Convinced that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him, Othello strangles her.

### The Past Tense

**Past Simple is used for …**
An action started and finished in the past:
- I lived in Sydney for two years, then I moved to Melbourne.

**Past Progressive (or Continuous) is used for …**
A repeated or continuous action in the past:
- I was studying all morning.
An activity which provides background to a single event:
- Awareness of climate change was already growing when Gore launched ‘An Inconvenient Truth’.

**Past Perfect is used for …**
A past event that clearly happened before another past event:
- By the time troops arrived in the country, the conflict had already ended.

### Past Tense in Essays

In essays, use past tense for:
- completed actions that occurred in the past

Hemingway drew on his experiences in World War I in constructing the character of Jake Barnet.

Dulay and Burt conducted their studies in the early seventies.

### Future Tense

**Future Simple is used to …**
Give information about a future event which is not obviously about to happen, or to predict a future event
- The weather report says it will rain tomorrow.
- This paper will focus on…

**Future Progressive (or Continuous) is used to …**
Show that something will be in progress at a point in the future
- This time tomorrow, I will be lying on the beach!

**Future Perfect is used to …**
Say that something will be finished or complete by a certain time in the future
- Next time you see me, I will have finished all my essays.

‘Going to’ is used instead of ‘will’ when there is strong intention

Tomorrow, I’m going to give up smoking. (Strong feeling or conviction)

When we can see the evidence of a future event

It’s going to rain. (You can see black clouds in the sky)

(Note: This form is rather informal, and best avoided in academic writing.)

Some possible alternatives: ‘(highly) likely to’, ‘it is a foregone conclusion’, ‘will very probably’, ‘is destined to’, ‘is certain to’. For example:

Informal: The government is going to hold an election in September.

Academic Style: An election is scheduled for September.

Informal: This model is going to fail.

Academic Style: This model is likely to fail.

### Verb tense consistency

Keep tenses consistent within your text. The same context or event usually requires the same tense.

The film Clueless tells the story of Cher Horowitz, a good-natured but superficial girl. Cher is attractive, popular, and extremely wealthy.

When changing tenses in a paragraph, use ‘signalling words’ or time phrases, e.g. since then, currently, now, in the past / future

### Active or Passive Voice?

Some uses of the passive voice:
- To put the focus of the sentence on the ‘action’ rather than the ‘actor’. This is common in academic essays and reports.

  Results were analysed using the two-sample t-test. ✓

  I analysed the results using… X (‘I’ is given too much importance here.)

- To create emphasis by shifting important information to the end of a sentence.

  The government failed to reduce the conflict. This issue was finally addressed by the UN.

- To shift wordy expressions to the end of a sentence.

  Tension was heightened by the sinking of a peacekeeping ship in international waters.

### Further Resources