

# 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* ~~told~~ **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... ✗ ('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

Swan, M. (2005). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: OUP.

## Academic Skills