

MPC English & Study Skills Center

Verb Tenses: Consistency of Use

Because verb tense tells the reader about time relationships—past tense shows something happened in the past—switching from one tense (time) to another can be very confusing to the reader. Switching from one mood or voice to another can also be confusing. It is important to try to avoid the following switches.

Switching from One Tense to Another

Verb tense tells us about time. Tense changes are required only when the time of actions changes, so tenses should not switch when there is no time change.

NO	I went into the building, and the next thing that I see is a man who is holding a gun and demanding my money.
YES	I went into the building and the next thing that I saw was a man who was holding a gun and demanding my money.

✦ The first verb "went" places this action in the past, and the other actions also happened in the past, not the present.

NO	The directors are working on changes to the rules so when students left their computers, they lost their privileges in the lab.
YES	The directors are working on changes to the rules so when students leave their computers, they lose their privileges in the lab.

✦ The first verb tense, "are working," is in the present progressive tense, showing a present action that is in progress. "Left" and "lost" switch to the past tense for no reason.

✦ Often it is appropriate to switch tenses, but generally there is a time word or phrase to explain the tense switch.

YES	Yesterday, I left my glasses at the doctor's office, so right now, I am having trouble reading.
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✦ The first event happened "yesterday," in the past, and the second action is happening "right now," in progress in the present.

Switching from One Mood to Another

There are three **moods** in English: indicative, imperative, and subjunctive. Most mood errors occur with switches between indicative and imperative moods. The imperative is rarely used in academic papers.

‡ **Indicative:** Used for statements or questions (interrogatives)

The executive handled the situation badly.
Do you love me?
She is in a hurry.
What shall I do?

‡ **Imperative:** Used for giving orders, directions

Sit down and open your books.
Take the book order to the office.
Turn right at the next corner and stop the car.

‡ **Subjunctive:** Used for conditions, wishes, or contrary-to-fact statements as well as in some "that" clauses

If I were you, I would do things differently. (*condition*)
I wish I were rich and famous. (*wish*)
Mary suggested that she finish her work next week. ("*that*")
Stan acted as if he were the king. (*contrary to fact*)
The doctor recommended that Sara be examined. ("*that*")

NO	When using the English & Study Skills Center, always log in , and you should remember to log out.
YES	When using the English & Study Skills Center, always log in and log out .

‡ "Log in" is in the imperative mood and "should remember" is indicative. Both verbs should be imperative (or both could be indicative).

NO	Students need to arrive on time to class. When the lecture begins, open your books and take notes quietly.
YES	Students need to arrive on time to class. When the lecture begins, students should open their books and take notes quietly.

‡ "Need" is in the indicative mood and "open" and "take" are in the imperative mood. Both should be indicative. Remember, in academic writing, students should avoid the use of the imperative.

Switching from Active to Passive Voice

In the active voice, the subject does the action of the verb. In the passive voice, the subject does nothing, and something/someone else in the sentence does something to the subject.

‡ **Active:** The subject does the action

The man shot the policeman.
The terrorists attacked the World Trade Center.
The student wrote a paper.

‡ **Passive:** The subject does NOT do the action

The policeman was shot by the man. (*"Man" did the shooting.*)
The World Trade Center was attacked by terrorists. (*"Terrorists" did the attacking.*)
The paper was written by Thomas. (*"Thomas" did the writing.*)

‡ **Note:** About 85% of the time, passives do not include the "by" phrase, but it is understood that someone or something else did the action.

The policeman was shot.
The World Trade Center was attacked.

‡ Passives are written with a form of the verb **be** and a past participle (was eaten, is heard, were injured, etc.).

‡ Passives are very often used in reporting (the bank was robbed, the man was convicted, the teenager was injured, the man was shot, etc.), but overuse of passives should be avoided in academic writing.

NO	It was reported by The Monterey Sentinel that low carbohydrate diets have some benefits.
YES	The Monterey Sentinel reported that low carbohydrate diets have some benefits.

‡ Again, avoid switching between active and passive.

NO	The man drove his car into the wall, and the car was wrecked .
YES	The man drove his car into the wall and wrecked the car.

‡ "Drove is in the active voice, and "was wrecked" is in the passive.

NO	She went to the church to get married, but she was jilted by her fiancé.
YES	She went to the church to get married, but her fiancé jilted her.

‡ "Went" is in the active voice, and "was jilted" is in the passive.

Note: For additional information about verb usage, **see also** the related handouts on **Verbs/Verb Tenses; Verb Tenses: Simple Present vs. Present Progressive; Verb Tenses: Talking about the Past; Modals; and Conditionals.**