



It's Tense: Become a Time Lord

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If you ask a linguist, she will tell you that English is a language with only two tenses — the present and the past — because we use the present tense to talk about the future.

If you ask an English language learner, she will probably tell you there are 12 tenses in English.

For those of us who write for work, let's stick with what we were taught at school, that English has three main tense categories.

## Keep your tense choice consistent

Readers will say your writing is coherent when you control your use of time — tense. Unnecessary shifts in tense will cause confusion and frustration.

### **The Present**

1. Simple Present: He sings
2. Present Perfect: He has sung
3. Present Continuous: He is singing
4. Present Perfect Continuous: He has been singing

### **The Past**

1. Simple Past: He sang
2. Past Perfect: He had sung
3. Past Continuous: He was singing
4. Past Perfect Continuous: He had been singing

### **The Future**

1. Simple Future: He will sing
2. Future Perfect: He will have sung
3. Future Continuous: He will be singing
4. Future Perfect Continuous: He will have been singing

## Writer's House Tense Tips

- Choose one main tense for your report and stick to it.
- Do not shift tenses unless there is a time change that must be shown.
- Ensure any new time frame (tense) you use relates to your original tense.



She **was** always late and **is asking** difficult questions.

Simple Past

Present Continuous



She **was** always late and always **asked** difficult questions.

Simple Past

Simple Past

- The first example uses two different tense forms. Since there is no indication that the actions happen apart from one another, there is no reason to shift the tense of the second verb.



During the meeting, one member of the public **stood** up and **walks** out.

Simple Past

Simple Present



During the meeting, one member of the public **stood** up and **walked** out.

Simple Past

Simple Past

- Like the first box, the first example uses two different tense forms. Since there is no indication that the actions happen apart from one another, there is no reason to shift the tense of the second verb.

# Change tense only when you must show a time change

1 *When* the dog owner **gets** here, the neighbours **will shout** abuse.

1st action will  
happen in the  
future

Simple  
Present

Simple  
Future

2nd action will  
happen in the  
future

- The first action will take place in the future therefore; the second action needs to indicate the future tense.

2 The board **reached** a decision *after* all the members **had read** every report.

Simple  
Past

Past  
Perfect

- The first action occurred in the past but after the second action. The second action requires the past perfect tense (had + verb).

3 *If* drivers **can see** the new signage, they **will be encouraged** to visit.

Simple  
Present

Past  
Future

- The first action in the above sentence happens in a conditional present. The second action is a future possibility dependent upon the first action taking place.

## Change tense only when the content of your report demands that you do so

A section of Greenacres Street **subsided** during the recent flood of

**Past**

13/4/23. The road **is** now uneven for approximately one kilometre.

**Present**

Contractors **installed** traffic barriers along the slump on 14/4/23 but the

**Past**

slump has now deepened. A geotechnical engineer **will investigate** the

**Future**

cause of the slump and **will provide** advice on remedial work. Temporary

**Future**

traffic management **has been** put in place until remedial work **is** undertaken.

**Present Perfect**

**Simple Present**

- Note how the following example incorporates tense change as needed to clarify several time periods.

“The suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.”

— Oscar Wilde

The logo for 'Get it Write' is centered in the lower half of the page. It consists of the words 'Get it' in a smaller, sans-serif font above the word 'Write' in a larger, bold, sans-serif font. The entire logo is contained within a light teal circular background that has a subtle drop shadow.

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