

Avoiding Those Awkward Shifts in *Verb Tense*

Verb tense can be a tricky thing. The main problem that students often have is shifting between different verb tenses - past to present, or past to past perfect - when there is no real need to. This can result in awkward moments in your writing, as well as actual confusion on the part of your reader.



****SO HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT VERB TO USE?****

WELL ...

It all depends on what you are doing in your paper.

✚ Narration (or, telling a story)

When you are narrating an event that has happened in your life, you use past tense. For example:

*During my eight grade year, I **experienced** one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. I **was** madly in love with my English teacher, and I **decided** that I **was going** to do whatever it **took** to impress him.*

The verb tense that you see here is past tense, an appropriate choice, since I am relating something that happened in the past.

So you're telling a story. What happens if you need to talk about something that happened before the actual story?



You need to switch to what's known as past perfect - a verb tense that involves using some form of the verb *have* with it. For example:

*When she arrived at the secret room, the heroine realized that she **had forgotten** the key.*

✚ Narrating Events that Happened Before Your Story

What does this mean? Well, say you're talking about an experience in which you and your parents disagree about what car to buy. You want to establish that prior to this, they had always trusted you to make a sound decision. You're dealing with two things: you and your parents disagree (past tense) and they had always trusted you to make the right decision in the past (past perfect tense).



past tense

My parents **didn't** approve of the car I wanted, but they **had trusted**

me in the past to make the right decision.



past perfect

As you can see, “perfect” tenses use **has**, **have** or **had**. Past perfect tense uses **had**, while present perfect tense, on the other hand, uses **has** or **have**.

For example:



present tense

My parents **don't** approve of the car I want, but they **have** always

trusted me in the past to make the right decision.



present perfect



past tense

*My parents **didn't** approve of the car I wanted, but they **had** always trusted me in the past.*



past perfect

SEE???

Talking About What Someone Else Has Written

Many times in academic writing, we are asked to respond to another text that we have been asked to read. This might take the form of a summary, a personal response, a critique, a review, etc.

When you are responding to a text, you need to use **present** tense. For example:

In** the article “Learning the Language of Spirituality,” Karen Herrick **shares** her conclusions about spiritual and religious discourse derived from her observations of a women’s Bible study. She **argues** that the group’s spiritual development **is

closely related to the acquisition of a spiritual “vocabulary,” or language.

In this example, I am informing the reader about what the article said. When I am doing this, I use **present** tense.

The important thing is to be aware of what verb tense you are using and to know why you are using it. Then be consistent with your use of verb tense. Only change tenses when you have to do so.