

# 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.*

- 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.