

Verb Tense Consistency

When we write, we use different verb tenses to discuss the past, the present, and the future. It doesn't matter what we are writing, we always use verb tenses. Changes in verb tense help readers to understand the timelines among various events in your writing. Inconsistent shifts in tense can cause confusion.

- Generally, writers maintain one tense for the main discourse and indicate changes in time frame by changing tense relative to that primary tense.

Simple Tenses

- **Past tense:** refers to things that happened in the past. It is used to narrate past events and refer to an author or an author's ideas as historical entities (biographical information about a historical figure or narration of developments in an author's ideas over time).
- **Present tense:** refers to a current state or perpetual or habitual actions, states facts, and discusses ideas or the ideas of others. Present tense can also describe action in a literary work, movie, or other fictional narrative as though it were happening now (for dramatic effect). If you do this, use present tense consistently throughout the narrative, shifting the tense to present only where appropriate to create the dramatic effect.
- **Future tense:** used to show future action and may be expressed in a variety of ways, including the use of **will, shall, is going to, are about to, tomorrow** and other adverbs of time and contextual cues.

Examples of Inconsistent Verbs (changing tenses when things occur in the same time frame)

- The ocean **contains** rich minerals that washed down from rivers and streams.
- ◆ **Contains** is present tense, referring to a current state; washed down is past. They are inconsistent. In other words, the past tense used for the second verb, washed down, creates the wrong meaning. The minerals currently and habitually wash down, so past tense is the wrong tense to use.

Corrected: The ocean contains rich minerals that wash down from rivers and streams.

- Yesterday we **had walked** to school but later rode the bus home.
- ◆ **Had walked** is past perfect tense but should be past to maintain consistency within the time frame (yesterday); rode is simple past tense, which fits the time frame of yesterday. Both events happened at the same time (yesterday) and therefore should be in the same tense (simple past).

Corrected: Yesterday we walked to school but later rode the bus home.



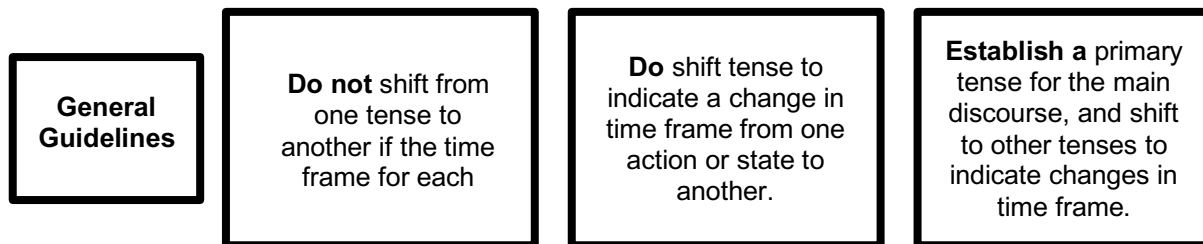
Using Other Tenses in Conjunction with Simple Tenses

Using different tenses within the same sentence is not always inconsistent or incorrect, though. Each tense has a distinct meaning.

Example 1: Simple past narration with perfect and *progressive* elements

By the time Tom **noticed** the doorbell, it had already rung three times. As usual, he had been listening to loud music on his stereo. He **turned down** and **stood up** to answer the door. An old man *was standing* on the steps. The man **began** to speak slowly, *asking* for directions.

In this example, the progressive verbs **had been listening** and **was standing** indicate action *underway at the time some other action took place*. The stereo-listening was underway when the doorbell rang. The past perfect verb had rung indicates action that had taken place before the main time frame (past tense **noticed**). The past perfect progressive verb had been listening suggests action that began in the time frame prior to the main time frame and that was *still underway as another action began*.



Example 2: Simple present narration with perfect and *progressive* elements

If the primary narration is in the present tense, then the present progressive or present perfect progressive is used to indicate action that is or has been underway as some other action begins.

By the time Tom **notices** the doorbell, it has already rung three times. As usual, he has been listening to loud music on his stereo. He **turns down** and **stands up** to answer the door. An old man *is standing* on the steps. The man **begins** to speak slowly, *asking* for directions.

Here, the progressive verbs **has been listening** and **is standing** indicate action *underway as some other action takes place*. The present perfect progressive verb has been listening suggests action that began in the time frame prior to the main narrative time frame and that is *still underway as another action begins*. In all of these cases, the progressive or -ing part of the verb merely indicates *ongoing action*.

This narrative style might be used to describe a scene from a novel, movie, or play, since action in fictional narrative is conventionally treated as always present.