

# UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

## VERB TENSES—GENERAL

Use of the correct verb tense allows you to express clearly the time relationships among your ideas. When deciding which verb tense to use, aim for consistency, simplicity, and clarity. Whenever possible, keep verbs in the same tense (consistency), and use either the simple present or the past tense (simplicity). Above all, choose the verb tense that most clearly expresses the idea you want to convey (clarity). In general, use the **present tense** to describe actions and states of being that are still true in the present; use the **past tense** to describe actions or states of being that occurred exclusively in the past.

The guidelines below are a great place to start for general information on how to use tense across many disciplines. For more details on discipline-specific conventions, see handouts “Verb Tenses—Literature” and “Verb Tenses—Science.”

### Present Tense

Use the present tense to make generalizations about your topic or the views of scholars:

- *The two Indus artifacts **provide** insight into ancient Hindu culture.*
- *Marxist historians **argue** that class conflict shapes political affairs.*
- *At the end of the chorus, the sopranos **repeat** the main theme.*

Use the present tense to cite an author or source (except in science writing, where past tense is used): (Note: Whether or not the author is still living is not relevant to selection of tense!)

- *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 **reflects** the idealism of the Second World War.*
- *The historian Donna Harsch **states** that “Social Democrats tried to prevent the triumph of Nazism in order to save the republic and democracy” (3).*
- *In On Liberty, John Stuart Mill **argues** that democratic ideals may lead to the so-called “tyranny of the majority.”*

### Past Tense

Use the past tense to describe actions or states of being that occurred exclusively in the past:

- *Hemingway **drew** on his experiences in World War I to construct the character of Jake Barnes.*
- *We **completed** the interviews in January 2018.*
- *The Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally **ended** segregation in public places and **banned** employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.*

## Present and Past Tense Together

At times you will use both present and past tense to show shifts in time relationships. Use present tense for those ideas/observations that are considered timeless and past tense for actions occurring in the past:

- *The Padshahnama* **is** an ancient manuscript owned by the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. This manuscript **details** the history of Shah-Jahan, the Muslim ruler who **commissioned** the building of the Taj Mahal (Webb et al. 134).
- Flynn (1999) **concluded** that high school students **are** more likely to smoke cigarettes if they **have** a parent who **smokes**.
- Simon (2000) **observed** that neutered cats **spend** less time stalking their prey.

Credit: Adapted from "Verb Tense," *Hamilton University Writing Center*. 16 October 2017, <https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/centers/writing/writing-resources/verb-tense>.

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