

Tense Shifting

SUU Writing Center

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Tense

Tense indicates the past (example--*ate*), present (*eat*), and future (*will eat*) of a verb. Many writers accidentally make sudden switches between the past and present time frames. Your professor may call this sort of error a *tense shift*. Here are some steps to assist you in diagnosing and curing tense shift problems.

The Academic Essay: In most academic papers documented according to Modern Language Association style, it is customary to write in the present tense when you refer to published sources. For example, you might say, *As Dr. Carl Hammond notes in a recent article, workplace writers must come to understand the rules of their own writing games.*

The Narrative Essay: If you are writing a narrative, you may choose to tell the story in the past tense, or, to create a sense of immediacy, in the present tense. However, if you choose the present tense, make sure that you stay in that time frame throughout. Switch to the past tense only when the characters being described in the present time frame have reason to recall the past of THAT moment. Here is an example: *Jason grips the table as he suddenly remembers the accident. The car had suddenly honked and careened through the intersection without braking.*

Steps in Determining and Correcting Tense:

1. To evaluate whether your paper has significant tense shifts, check your thesis statement. If your thesis statement is constructed solely in the present, your paper should, most likely, stay in that time frame.
2. Compare your introduction and conclusion. Do the two match in time frame? If not, decide which tense is more appropriate given your purpose and audience.
3. Once your introduction and conclusion match in tense, take a look at the body of your paper. Does it follow the same tense pattern as your introduction and conclusion?
4. If the body of your paper appears to be a bit choppy, go through paragraph by paragraph, focusing on the verbs and making sure your use of them is consistent.
5. When the entire paper has been revised for tense shifts, take a break, and then return for one final reading to ensure that you didn't miss any mistakes.