

Shifts in Tense

Verb tense refers to *when* an action takes place. There are three simple tenses of a verb: the **present, past, and future**.

The **present tense** indicates an action taking place – right now – at this moment.

The **past tense** indicates an action that has occurred in the past.

The **future tense** indicates an action that will occur in the future.

Note the table below that shows the present, past, and future tenses of the words “work” and “talk”. The suffix **ed** is added to create the past tense and **will** is added to create the future tense.

PRESENT	PAST	FUTURE
work	worked	will work
talk	talked	will talk

When a verb follows this very predictable pattern, it is said to be **regular**.

When a verb deviates from this pattern, it is said to be **irregular**.

These simple tenses are very versatile. With the addition of auxiliary verbs and suffixes, **perfect** and **progressive** verb tenses can be formed, giving the writer countless ways to express time. According to the *Brief Holt Handbook*, the **perfect tense** allows the writer to “designate actions that were or will be completed before other actions or conditions”; whereas, the **progressive tense** “expresses continuous action”. For example:

Future perfect: By the next fiscal year, the school district **will have ended** the music program.

Present progressive: The volcano **is erupting**, and lava **is flowing** toward the town.

Ultimately, like a palette of many colors, a writer could use three different perfect tenses and six progressive tenses to indicate time. However, when using these different verb forms, it is important to be consistent.

To avoid an awkward or confusing composition, a writer should not unreasonably change verb tenses within a sentence or in a related group of sentences. According to *Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition*, when a writer is writing about events in the past, for example, he/she should consistently use the past tense – unless there is some compelling reason to shift to another tense.

FYI: Note that this is NOT saying there is no room for changing tenses. The idea is to shift tenses **ONLY** when the shifts indicate a reasonable change in the time of the action.

Acceptable Tense Shift: *The Wizard of Oz* **is** a film that has enchanted audiences since it **was made** in 1936.

Explanation: The verb **was made** refers to an action that occurred in 1936; whereas, **is** indicates a present interest in the film.

Unacceptable Tense Shift: We **viewed** *A Caribbean Mystery* and **watch** intently as Joan Hickson **portrays** Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple.

Explanation: **Viewed** refers to action that happened in the past. It is incorrect to shift to the present tense (**watch and portrays**) when the remaining action within the sentence also occurred in the past.

Practice Exercises:

The following selection should be written in the past tense. Some of the verbs are correctly written; others will need to be changed so the entire selection is written in the past tense.

1. Chad and I realized that we need a change of pace. 2. After four years of the usual summer job drudgery, it is time for a summer job with pizzazz. 3. It is Chad's brilliant idea that we should be camp counselors at Camp Gowitha in the upper peninsula of Michigan.

4. The first morning at camp we awakened to the sound of a bugle. 5. I assumed I had just fallen asleep. 6. 5:00 A.M., apparently, is considered an appropriate rise and shine hour at Camp Gowitha. 7. I am cold too. 8. Had I known it is going to be so cold in the north woods, I would have brought more blankets.

9. After arousing the sleepy campers, we all will march to the dining hall for a hearty breakfast. 10. Canoeing and swimming lessons will follow breakfast. 11. Those who are able to use the canoes were fortunate; those who had swimming lessons were not. 12. Even with the sun shining on the lake, the water is cold. 13. The beginning swimmers' class will suffer the most as they stood chest deep in the shallow water, bending their heads to blow bubbles, and waiting their turn to face and back float. 14. Because I had the dubious distinction of being on my high school's water polo team, I too stand in the freezing water easing small, blue, shivering bodies onto their backs and repeating, "Arch your back, tip your head back, relax." 15. All the while, I am regretting every minute of our decision to become counselors at Camp Gowitha. 16. My feet and legs are numb, and my spine stiffens with each frigid wavelet. 17. I shiver and long for the summer jobs of the past.

Answers:

1. needed
2. was
3. was
4. no change
5. no change
6. was
7. was
8. was
9. marched
10. followed
11. were
12. was
13. suffered
14. stood
15. was regretting
16. were, stiffened
17. shivered, longed