

## Using Verb Tense

Here you can learn about

- **the basics of using verb tense in an academic paper.**

This information sheet focuses on the three verb tenses most commonly used in English academic texts. It can only provide a simplified guide; more detail is available in the books under Useful Resources. This sheet is linked to [Information Sheet 3a: Using Verbs in Active and Passive Voice](#). An associated [worksheet](#) is also available.

### Basics

The English language has numerous verb tenses. The most important three in written academic English are

Tense	Active voice	Passive voice
Present	<i>Smith (2018) shows ...</i>	<i>It is shown ...</i>
Present perfect	<i>Smith (2018) has shown ...</i>	<i>It has been shown ...</i>
Simple past	<i>Smith showed ...</i>	<i>It was shown ...</i>

In general: Copy the tenses generally used in the journal you are writing for. If you cannot identify a consistent use of tenses, then use

- the present tense to refer to
  - things that are generally accepted facts
  - things you believe are generally true
  - things your data suggest
- the present perfect tense to refer to activities that are ongoing
- the simple past tense to refer to finished work.

It can be difficult but is not forbidden to use a mixture of tenses in sentences or paragraphs, e.g.,

*Many children **have developed** asthma from being exposed to cigarette smoke or road traffic. The effect of parental smoking on wheezing and asthma in children **is well established**, but evidence that asthma is more common in children living close to a main road **has not yet been confirmed**.*

In that text, the present tense is used to express generally accepted facts, and the present perfect is used to express findings that are not so well established.



## Tense Choice

Current practice in written academic English usually allows you to use the **present tense** unless there is a good reason for not doing so. Here are some of those reasons:

- You are describing work you did in the past but that is now finished, e.g., in your Methods and, partially, Results sections – use the **simple past**.
- You want to disagree with/criticize the findings of other research – use the **simple past**.
- You want to indicate that your results may only be true under certain conditions, e.g., for the participants in your survey – use the **simple past**.
- The sentence contains key words that require another tense:
  - Words indicating finished time, e.g., *In 2011/yesterday/last year* – use the **simple past**.
  - The words *just/yet/never/already/ever/so far/up to now/recently/since/for* - when used to indicate time, e.g., *For the last three years* – use the **present perfect**.

Always use the **present tense** to describe Figures/Tables in your paper, e.g., *Figure 1 shows ...*

Some papers tend to be written only in the present tense e.g., papers on modelling or mathematical papers.

## Useful Book Resources

Caplan, N.A. 2012. *Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

Swales, J.M. & Feak, C.B. 2004. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

Weissberg, R. & Buker, S. 1990. *Writing Up Research: Experimental Research Report Writing for Students of English*. Englewood Cliffs. Prentice Hall Regents.

## Final Comments/Tips

- Some verbs are used more often in combination with a particular verb tense. For a good overview based on 2011 data, see the Appendix in Caplan (2012) p. 165-168.
- In the literature review, you can move from using the simple past to describe general background information to the present perfect for previous work more directly relevant to your research.
- The correct use of more than one verb tense can add variety to your text and make it livelier, especially in your literature review.