

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.