

Verb Tense Use for Multilingual Writers

The verb tense system in English is very complicated—English has past, present and future tenses and all of these have both simple and perfect iterations. The good news is that for most academic work, simple past or present are the only tenses required. Here is an overview of verb tenses and some tips for editing.

Simple Tenses

Simple tenses are generally used to refer to a whole event or state – in the present, future, or past—rather than a specific moment or event that is ongoing.

Tense	Explanation	Example
Simple Present	True now and generally	She writes for the Vancouver Sun.
	The event occurs at regular, repeated intervals including now.	She writes three feature articles per month.
Simple Past	The event was completed in a specifically stated or understood past time.	She wrote an article about the election last year.
Simple Future	The event is predicted to happen at a stated or understood future time	She will write an article about climate change next spring.

Progressive Tenses

The action is in progress at a specified time in the past, present or future. Always use the –ing form of the main verb with a form of the verb “to be” (ex: is or was) as the auxiliary.

Tense	Explanation	Example
Present Progressive	The action is in progress right now, possibly temporarily.	He is writing a paper on Picaso this week.
Past Progressive	The action was in progress at a specific time in the past or for a duration of time in the past.	He was looking up sources for his paper when I arrived at the library.

Tense	Explanation	Example
Future Progressive	The action is predicted to be in progress at a specific time or event in the future	He will be writing the final draft tomorrow.

Perfect Tenses

Perfect tenses indicate that an action has been completed before a known or specified time or event. Always use the appropriate form of the verb “to have” as the auxiliary, followed by the past participle form of the main verb.

Tense	Explanation	Example
Present Perfect	The action was completed some time before now, but the time in the past is not known or is not important. What is important is the connection to now.	He has painted three portraits.
	The action began in the past and continues to the present.	He has studied at Emily Carr University since 2012.
Past Perfect	The action was completed before a specified time or event in the past.	He had found only one source for his Picasso paper when I ran into him in the library.
Future Perfect	The action is predicted to be completed at a specific time or event in the future	He will have finished his paper on Picasso by the time we have dinner next week.

Perfect Progressive Tenses

Perfect progressive tenses indicate that an action is in progress before a known or specified time or event. Form this tense with the appropriate form of verb “to have” as the auxiliary followed by “been” and the -ing form of the main verb.

Tense	Explanation	Example
Present perfect progressive	The action begins in the past and continues until present. The time period of the action is often stated. The length of the action and the end time of the action are both stated.	He has been working on that essay since noon.
Past perfect progressive	The action lasts a stated length of time and ends at a specific time or event in the past.	He had been working on his research paper for two hours when his computer crashed.
Future perfect progressive	The length of the action and the end time of the action are both stated.	By 5 pm, I will have been working on this project for 2 hours.

Editing Tips: Since the verb tense system is complex, verbs should be on the top of your editing checklist. Always check that your verb tenses are used consistently. Ask yourself if each verb should be in past or present – don't switch back and forth between these tenses unless you have a reason to do so. Be aware of your time markers (such as 'yesterday'), which can indicate tense.