

Grinnell College Writing Lab Guide to the Use of Verb Tense in Academic Writing

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Welcome to this semester's first issue of the Writing Forum. Please remember that we welcome all comments, suggestions, articles, questions, and any other type of response. In this issue we bring to you a handout which we plan to distribute to students seeking advice on the use of tenses. This version updates a previous Writing Lab handout on this subject. We would like to thank all the faculty members who offered comments and advice to us on this handout, including Peter Connelly, Ann Ellis, Jared Gardner, Mary Mader, Kent McClelland, Bill Patch, Gretchen Revie, Don Smith, Ira Strauber, and Bruce Voyles.

This guide presents a number of different sets of examples; read through it and try to find the set that seems most appropriate to your situation.

A. First, here are some general principles.

1. Use past tense to narrate past events; e.g., President Wilson **hoped** for vindication in the upcoming election.
2. Use present or present progressive to write about things happening now; e.g., The war **intensifies** daily. * The situation **is worsening** by the hour.
3. Use present tense to state general truths or habitual action; e.g., Two physical bodies **cannot occupy** the same space at the same time. We **long** for final answers.

B. When you're writing about Literature, some special conventions apply.

Most of these involve what we call the "literary present," the idea that fiction exists in a timeless world properly described in the present tense. Such conventions apply to discussions of theme, plot, or authorial intent.

1. In *The Color Purple* Alice Walker **shows** the lasting affection between two women.
2. In *The Crucible* John Proctor **decides** to die rather than tarnish his reputation.
3. Pope **satirizes** the frivolity of a privileged society.

At times, you may need to use other tenses to help clarify complex chronological relationships; e.g., Even though Claudius earlier killed Hamlet's father, he now expects few problems from the young prince.

C. When you're writing about history, some different principles apply.

1. As a general rule, most of what you say in history papers will be narrative couched in some form of the past tense: e.g., Although Lodge once **had supported** a post-war league, he **reversed** himself after Wilson linked such a plan to the concept of a "peace without victory."

This principle applies to thoughts as well as actions, e.g., Many progressives, who **thought** well of Wilson's dream of a new world order, **drew** back in revulsion when the terms of the treaty were published.

Accordingly (revisiting an earlier example), in a history essay you'd likely say, "Pope **satirized** the frivolity of a privileged society."

Here you would talk not about his timeless literary intent, but about specific things he said or did in a real time and place.

2. In general, reserve the present tense for presenting opinions current among historians today; e.g., Link **contends** that Wilson's critics **have minimized** the difficulties he faced.
3. As one further point, unless you've good reason otherwise, it's probably better to couch your historical statements in sentences that discuss directly the actions of historical actors, not the content of sources.

So rather than saying, "Document 7 **shows** Voltaire's contempt for priests," you might instead say, "Voltaire **held** priests in utter contempt (Doc. 7)."

D. When you're working on research papers or reports, in whatever disciplines, follow these principles gleaned from the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association and from a number of other style manuals.

1. For a "review of literature," a discussion of previous views on the subject, you have two options. The American Political Science Association and others in the social sciences suggest the use of present tense, reserving past tense to indicate significant chronological distinctions; e.g., Strauber (1922) **thought** this process important, but Grey (1988) sharply **disagrees**.

In contrast, the APA recommends the use of past or present perfect tense, e.g., Mme. Curie **demonstrated** this principle. Researchers **have shown** this concept valid.

2. Use past tense to describe experimental procedure--that is, to narrate what you've done to learn the things you're writing about; e.g., Participants **were required** to manipulate three different objects. * Erickson **interviewed** many survivors of the Buffalo Creek flood.

3. Use present tense to discuss results and to present conclusions-- that is, the general truths you've discovered; e.g., Plainly, the first variable **exerts** a significant effect. These results **demonstrate** clearly

And remember, sometimes you may be performing more than one of these tasks, even in the same sentence; e.g., This experiment **indicated** that monkeys **love** bananas.

Finally, if you're in doubt about details, consult one of the discipline-specific style manuals available on reserve in Burling. Or ask your professor; use specific examples to illustrate your questions. And remember, whatever system you use, *be consistent* in each essay.