



UNIVERSITY OF
**DETROIT
MERCY**

Verb Tenses and Usage

udm.mywconline.com (for appointments)
<https://writingcenter.udmercy.edu/> (for resources)



The Writing Center
DETROIT MERCY

Choosing the Right Verb and the Correct Verb Tense

Verbs are central to the meaning of every sentence—they express actions, processes, and states of being while helping readers understand when events occur. Choosing precise, varied verbs and using consistent verb tenses makes writing clearer, more engaging, and easier to follow.

As you write and revise written assignments, pay attention not only to whether your verbs are in the correct tense, but also whether stronger, more specific verbs can better communicate your ideas.

Writing Center consultants often help writers identify patterns of tense shifts and choose verbs that best match the purpose and conventions of their discipline.

Why Verb Tense Matters

Consistent verb tense helps readers follow your ideas and strengthens your credibility as a writer. In Writing Center sessions, consultants often look for unnecessary shifts in tense because they can confuse readers. Keep in mind that expectations vary across disciplines, so always follow your instructor's guidelines.

Disciplinary Differences

Literary studies often use the present tense when discussing texts:

⇒ “Shakespeare explores ambition.”

History often uses the past tense to describe historical events.

⇒ “The Berlin Wall finally fell in 1989.”

Scientific writing commonly uses the past tense to describe methods and results:

⇒ “The samples were analyzed.”

Common Verb Tenses

Tense	When to use it	Example
Simple Present	General truths; analysis; current ideas	The author argues that...
Simple Past	Completed actions	Researchers collected data.
Simple Future	Future actions	The study will examine...
Present Perfect	Started in past and continues or has present relevance	Scholars have debated this issue.
Past Perfect	Action completed before another past event	The team had finished before class began.
Future Perfect	Completed before a future point	By Friday, I will have revised the paper.

Revision Tips for Reviewing Verb Usage

Read your paper one paragraph at a time and highlight every verb. Ask whether the tense matches your purpose and discipline. Ensure consistency in tense. Revise the verbs that shift without a clear reason.

Revision Checklist

- ☐ My verb tense is consistent throughout each section of the paper.
- ☐ My verb tense matches the conventions of my discipline (e.g., humanities, sciences).
- ☐ I have replaced vague verbs (is, does, gets) with stronger, more precise verbs where appropriate.
- ☐ I avoided unnecessary shifts between past, present, and future tense.

If you are unsure about how to answer such questions, please speak to a Writing Center consultant for assistance.

Source: Adapted from Utah Valley University Writing Center. Verb Tenses. <https://www.uvu.edu/writingcenter/>