

KEEP VERB TENSE CONSISTENT

It may surprise you to learn that the most common verb tense used in academic writing is simple present, followed by simple past as the second most common (Dollahite & Haun, 2012). In fact, the simple present, the simple past, and present perfect account for about 80% of the verb tenses used in academic writing (UNC Chapel Hill, 2013). Good academic writers usually rely on the simple present tense and change to other tenses only when there is a specific reason to do so.

Keeping your tenses within one time frame – present, past, or future – without switching unnecessarily from one tense to another helps to build cohesion within your writing. When you do need to switch from one time frame to another, clearly signaling this change will help your reader.

Guidelines for Verb Tense Choice

1. Use the simple present, simple past, or present perfect unless there is a clear reason to choose another verb tense.
 - a. Simple present is used to present general information, facts, and opinions or to make statements about what is generally true
 - b. Simple past is used to refer to specific events that began and ended in the past or to report another person's research or ideas.
 - c. Present perfect is used to report another person's research or ideas, to report on research trends, or to show that something started in the past and is still current.
2. Provide a signal word or time phrase when switching time frames.
 - a. Use time phrases that help the reader understand the context of the past event, such as "at that time," "in the past," or "in 2001."
 - b. Use a time phrase also when switching back to present tense if this will help your reader.

Example

Underline the verbs she uses. What tenses is she using & why? Discuss with your partner.

Culture shock is a response people have when they leave their own culture and stay for a long time in a different culture. Homesickness, sadness, insomnia, and feeling vulnerable are common symptoms of culture shock. Because of these symptoms, people usually have a negative feeling about culture shock, but Dr. Carmen Guanipa (1988) explained that culture shock is a good chance to look at one's life objectives, and also it is a chance to learn and develop new perspectives. Students can learn about themselves and improve their personal character from culture shock. Therefore, though culture shock has a negative image, students shouldn't worry too much because it can be a great opportunity for personal growth. When I came to the United States last year, I experienced culture shock. I was sometimes depressed and sometimes excited.

Now You Try

Read and discuss the following paragraph by Tollefson titled “Is a Hero Really Nothing but a Sandwich?” When you have finished reading through the paragraph:

1. Underline each verb and identify the tense
 2. Why does Tollefson use past tense in the first paragraph?
 3. When does he switch from past to present tense? Why do you think he switches tense here?
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For several years a picture of Warren Spahn of the Milwaukee Braves hung on my closet door, one leg poised in mid-air before he delivered a smoking fastball. Time passed and Spahn's picture gave way to others: Elvis, John F. Kennedy, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Ben Hogan. These heroic images have reflected back to me what I hoped to become: a man with good moves, a sex symbol, an electrifying orator, a plumb of depths, a teller of tales, a graceful golfer. Like serpents, we keep shedding the skins of our heroes as we move toward new phases in our lives. Like many of my generation, I have a weakness for hero worship. At some point, however, we all begin to question our heroes and our need for them. This leads us to ask: What is a hero?

Despite immense differences in cultures, heroes around the world generally share a number of traits that instruct and inspire people.