



Faculty of Engineering
and Applied Science

USING THE CORRECT TENSE

Regardless of a person's proficiency in the English language, errors with verb tense are always a possibility when writing a technical document. Although it might seem like a minor error, using the incorrect tense can cause the meaning of a sentence to change drastically. For example, the sentences "I have a car" and "I had a car" are both grammatically correct, but their meanings are essentially opposites. This document discusses how to use the correct verb tense for the context of sentence.

TENSE AND ASPECT

The English verb system has a number of components, and two of the main ones are tense and aspect. Simply put, **tense** is when something happens. English has a past tense to refer to completed events, a present tense to refer to ongoing or current events, and a future tense¹ to refer to events that have not yet started.

If tense is when something happens, **aspect** is how it happens in relation to the tense. English has four possible aspects:

- **SIMPLE:** Used for factual statements or regular actions. These can be in the past, present or future.
 - *Past* The UN **funded** the award.
 - *Present* The UN **funds** the award.
 - *Future* The UN **will fund** the award.

- **CONTINUOUS:** Used to express longer duration events. With the present, it can be an action currently in progress. It is also known as the *progressive* in some sources.
 - *Past* The jury **was deliberating** all night.
 - *Present* The jury **is deliberating** right now.
 - *Future* The jury **will be deliberating** tonight.

- **PERFECT:** Describes an action was completed before a time in the past, present or future, but it remains true at that time. For the past and future, a second event occurring before the first is required. Alternatively, the second event may just be a time.
 - *Past* They **had made** a decision before the last entry arrived.
 - *Present* They **have made** a decision.
 - *Future* They **will have made** a decision by noon tomorrow.

- **PERFECT-CONTINUOUS:** A combination of the previous two aspects.
 - *Past* They **had been arguing** when someone knocked on the door.
 - *Present* They **have been arguing** for 20 minutes.
 - *Future* By 9:00 p.m., they **will have been arguing** for 30 minutes straight.

¹ Strictly speaking, it is not a tense. It is actually a mood. It is referred to as a tense for simplicity.

COMMON TENSE/ASPECT COMBINATIONS

The following are three of the most common verb tense/aspect combinations in academic report writing²:

- **SIMPLE PRESENT:** The most common combination; it describes anything factual and generally true. The simple present can also be used to describe current opinions on a topic, including what some researchers might believe based on research they have already conducted.
- **SIMPLE PAST:** The second-most common combination; it describes completed actions, including those completed by the author. It can also be used to describe what others have done in the past.
- **PRESENT PERFECT:** This one is far behind the other two. It is usually used to describe the current situation when that situation developed over time. For example, we might say that, "Cell phones are common in Canadian classrooms." While this is true, it did not just happen on a single day. Instead, we might say that, "Cell phones have become common in Canadian classrooms" as the process was gradual. The present perfect is mostly seen in introductions.

USE IN SPECIFIC SECTIONS

Table 1 lists typical document sections, indicating the common tense(s) in that section:

Table 1: Common tenses in report sections

Section	Simple Present	Simple Past	Present Perfect
Summary/Abstract	✓	✓	✓
Introduction	✓	✓	✓
Methods/Procedure		✓	
Results		✓	
Discussion	✓	✓	
Conclusion	✓		

Despite the lower number of check marks, the simple present is indeed the most common tense. When writing, the default should be present simple unless there is a good reason to select a different tense/aspect combination.

SPECIAL NOTE: MISUSE OF THE FUTURE

Of all the verb tense mistakes that occur, the most common seems to be the use of the future for events that have already happened. This is most often seen in summaries/abstracts and introductions, when the writer says what "will" be done. The problem with this phrasing is that it creates ambiguity: does the author mean it will be discussed by the end of the paper, or does the author mean that these actions will be done at some point in the future? Restrict the use of the future for events that have not actually been done yet, and for discussing the contents of the current, completed document, use the simple present tense. An example of this can be seen in the last sentence of the blurb in this document.

VERB TENSE CONSISTENCY

While many paragraphs will be mostly one tense, it is possible to go from tense to tense within a paragraph, or even within a sentence. The guiding principle should be to keep the tense the same unless the context of the sentence requires a shift in tense/aspect. On the next page, there is an annotated example of a paragraph in which the tenses switch at certain points.

² B. Qahtani and K. S. Folse, "The frequency of the twelve verb tenses in history papers written by university native writers," M.A. dissertation, Dept. Mod. Lang. & Lit., Univ. Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA, 2017.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cell phones **have become**¹ common in Canadian classrooms. While some schools **have**² strict regulations against their usage, others **have embraced**³ these technological devices. Their intention **is**⁴ to use the connectivity and adaptability of smartphones for educational purposes. Some attempts at integrating cell phones into the educational system **have failed**⁵ because they **did not consider**⁶ the multi-tasking nature of cell phones. The reality **is**⁷ that students **use**⁸ cell phones for communicating with friends and family and for playing games, and finding a balance between these uses and the intended educational pursuits **is**⁹ not a simple task.

¹They gradually became popular = **pres. perf.**

²The regulations exist now = **simple pres.**

³Others embraced it before now, and likely continue to do so today = **pres. perf.**

⁴This intention is their current one = **simple pres.**

⁵These were individual failures in the past, but they are being viewed as a cumulative group, and in this group, as of today, they have all failed. = **pres. perf.**; N.B. the simple past could have been used here as well.

⁶The reason that they did not succeed was a past mistake = **simple past**

^{7,8,9}The remainder are ideas that are generally true = **simple present**