

Verb Tense

Verb tense allows a writer to travel in time by telling a reader when something happened. Consider the following examples:

I have a dog.

The verb **have** tells the reader that the writer owns a dog **today**, in the present time.

I had a dog.

The verb **had** tells the reader that the writer owned a dog **before today**, sometime in the past.

I will have a dog.

The verb **will have** tells the reader that the writer plans to have a dog **in the future**, sometime after the present moment.

Three basic verb tenses are **present**, **past**, and **future**. The **present** tense tells a reader that something is happening right now. The **past** tense tells a reader that something happened at an earlier date. The **future** tense tells a reader that something is going to happen later. Here are a few examples:

Present	Past	Future
have/has	had	will have
am/is/are	was/were	will be
drive/drives	drove	will drive
win/wins	won	will win
type/types	typed	will type
walk/walks	walked	will walk

Notice that many words can be placed into the past tense by simply adding -ed (play/played) while other words require other changes to be placed into the past tense (drive/drove). If you're ever in doubt about how to put a verb in the past tense, you can always consult a dictionary.

Using a Consistent Verb Tense

Using a consistent verb tense is important because without it, your reader will constantly be jumping between different periods of time. Consider the following example of using an **inconsistent verb tense**:

*The loud beeping of my alarm **wakes** me from a peaceful night's sleep. I **pushed** the snooze immediately, not quite ready to leave the comfort of my pillow.*

Notice that the verb **wakes** is in the present tense, indicating that the person is waking up today. However, the verb **pushed** is in the past tense, indicating that the individual pushed the snooze button yesterday or earlier than yesterday. Your reader may become confused as to whether this is happening today or happened yesterday.

To correct errors like this, a writer can choose a consistent verb tense and stick with it unless the writer has a valid reason for changing it. Here are some ways that the above passage could be revised to keep a consistent verb tense:

*The loud beeping of my alarm **woke** me from a peaceful night's sleep. I **pushed** the snooze immediately, not quite ready to leave the comfort of my pillow.*

In this example, both of these events occurred in the past.

*The loud beeping of my alarm **wakes** me from a peaceful night's sleep. I **push** the snooze immediately, not quite ready to leave the comfort of my pillow.*

In this example, both of these events occur in the present.

Changing Verb Tense

There are times when it is appropriate for a writer to change the verb tense. For example, a writer could be discussing things that did, indeed, occur at different times. Consider this example:

Today, I am swimming at my brother's house; yesterday, I swam at the pool.

In this example, it is appropriate to use two different verb tenses because the writer is discussing different events that happened at different times.

Using verb tense appropriately can help writers communicate clearly with his or their audience.