

## Tenses in academic writing

Writers use tenses to give a particular meaning. The writer might be trying to emphasise the currency, regularity or even ownership of an idea. Some tenses are therefore used more than others in academic English.

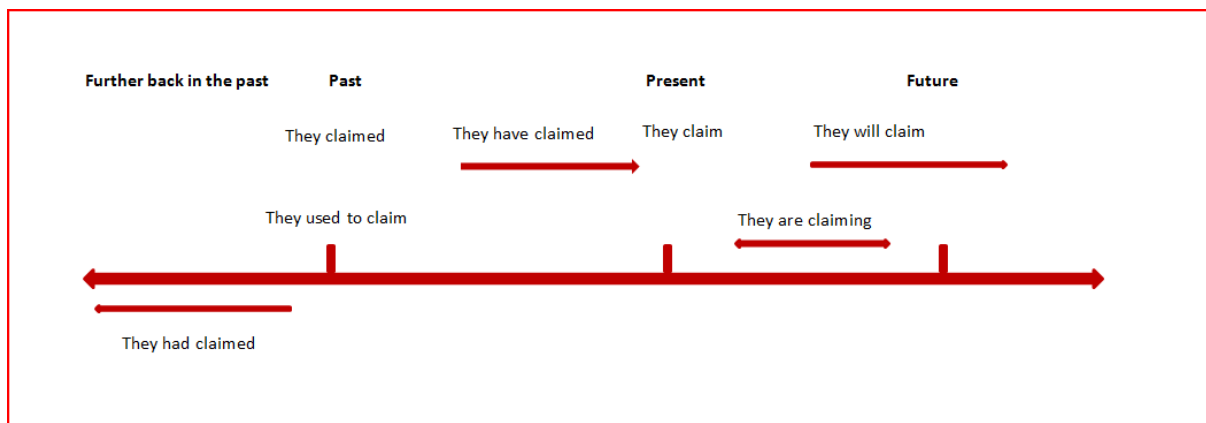
	Simple	Perfect	Continuous/Progressive	Perfect Continuous/Progressive
	-	have + past participle	be + -ing	have + past participle + been + -ing
<b>Present</b>	claim/claims	has claimed	am/is/are claiming	has/have been claiming
<b>Past</b>	claimed	had claimed	was/were claiming	had been claiming
<b>Future</b>	will claim	will have claimed	will be claiming	will have been claiming

The **simple tenses** are used for events which are immediate facts (or strong predictions in the future), complete or unchanging.

The **perfect tenses** are used to show the prior nature of an event in relation to some other point in time.

The **continuous/progressive** tenses are used for an event which is not complete, or is temporary or changing. (N.B. The word 'continuous' is used in British and Australian grammar books, while US grammar books use the word 'progressive' for these tenses.)

Here is a timeline to show you some tenses commonly used in academic writing: Simple and perfect, present and past tenses are used most in academic writing.



### Present simple

- A general principle

*Talent shows usually allow people to demonstrate their creative abilities.*

- Someone's opinion

*Professor Grahamarian thinks that talent shows are important.*

- The results of an experiment

*The judges' scores show that X is the clear winner.*

- A habitual action in the present

*People nearly always feel nervous before they perform on stage.*

- A theory

*Bobby Dylan's theory about talent contests is that one should not judge by appearances.*

- A claim

*Bobby Dylan claims that talent shows are the best way for people to become famous.*

- A fact

*Talent shows are exciting.*

### **Past simple**

- What happened

*There were two acts. Prince Wolfgang won the competition.*

- What happened in the past but is different now

*In the past, shows were simpler.*

- Ideas that were held in the past but are no longer held

*People thought that talent contests were bad.*

### **Used to is also used to compare the past to the present**

*People used to win smaller prizes.* [This implies that the situation has changed.]

### **Present perfect**

- Something that has changed over time

*Recently, talent contests have become bigger and more glamorous.*

- Recent research and its present impact

*Recent research has shown that talent contests can make people nervous.*

### **Tenses less used in academic writing**

Generally, academic writing is based on research or theories that already exist, have already happened, or refer to a current event or view. This means that the various forms of the **future** are less likely to be used in essays, although they might be used in reports.

- 'going to' future: *They are going to research this next year.*

- future simple: *They will research this next year.*

- future continuous: *They will be playing some music by Mozart.*

- future perfect: *At the end of August they will have had over 150 rehearsals.*

The **continuous/progressive** forms are less common in academic writing because they indicate something temporary.

- present continuous/progressive: *They are researching this now.*

- present perfect continuous/progressive: *They will be playing some music by Mozart.*
- past perfect continuous/progressive: *They had been researching this for many years before they found any significant results.*
- future perfect continuous/progressive: *By the end of August we will have been playing music together for three years.*

The **past perfect** situates one activity in the past before another activity. It is sometimes used in academic writing.

- past perfect: *They had researched this for many years before they found any significant results.*
- past perfect continuous/progressive: *They had been researching this for many years before they found any significant results.*

The difference between the past perfect and the past perfect continuous is that the continuous form puts more emphasis on the length of the activity.

### Stative verbs

Some verbs are called 'stative verbs'. These are verbs that refer to states or preferences rather than to physical actions. They are not normally used in continuous or progressive forms. Here are some examples:

Stative verbs		
agree	involve	realise
appear	know	recognise
believe	like	resemble
consist	love	seem
constitute	mean	understand
doubt	need	want
hate	own	weigh
include	prefer	wish

e.g. We say, *They agree* rather than *They are agreeing*.

(Visit the [Perfect English Grammar](http://www.perfect-english-grammar.com) website for a comprehensive list of stative verbs and explanations about how to use them.)

### Consistency of verb tenses

Jumping from tense to tense can make reading difficult and confusing. Within a sentence there needs to be a logical sequence to the ideas or events. From sentence to sentence within a paragraph there also needs to be a logical relationship.

Incorrect: *The study ended suddenly because many of the participants have moved away.*

This is confusing because the writer starts by looking back at the past (*ended*) but then changes their perspective to the present perfect (*have moved*).

Correct: *The study ended suddenly because many of the participants had moved away.*

This is better, because all the action is situated in the past.

### **Citing sources and verb tenses**

When you are reporting on research in the past, then a **past** tense is mostly used.

e.g. *According to the findings by Henderson (2008), all the interviewees reported negative side effects from the drug.*

However, in a literature review or a paragraph that is trying to stress that certain ideas are still relevant, the **present perfect** tense may be used.

e.g. *Even though linguists have argued that language learning is an incremental process, young children have shown that risk taking and game playing speed up the process (Chen 2009; Brown 2003).*

In addition, if research results are still meaningful then the present simple is used.

e.g. *The data collected from Green's (2004) research suggest that exposure to stress reduces language fluency.* (N.B. *data* can be either singular or plural.)

### **Subject/verb agreement**

In English, subjects and verbs should agree.

Present simple. All the verb endings are the same in regular verbs, except in the third person singular (*he/she/it*). Verbs after *he/she/it* add *-s* or *-es*.

I/you/we/they	claim	research	deny
he/she/it	claims	researches	denies

Most verbs in the present simple add *-s* in the third person.

*-es* is added to verbs ending in *-o*, *-ch*, *-sh*, *-ss*, *-tch*, *-x* and *-z*.

Verbs ending in a consonant + *y* (e.g. *deny*, *rely*) change the *y* to an *i* and add *-es*.

When there are several nouns, check which is the subject of the verb to see how it agrees. The subject may not be the word closest to the verb.

e.g. *The use of these procedures **is** recommended by the university.* (In this example, it is the word *use* which is the subject.)

e.g. *Recent discoveries in the area **have** led to an improvement in treatment.*

## **Noun + noun = plural verb**

*e.g. A girl and a dog were sitting on the library steps.*

## **Difficult cases**

- *The number of + singular verb. The number of cases is declining.*

- *A number of + plural verb. A number of people are waiting for their results.*

## **There is/There are**

Turn the sentence round to see if you need *there is* or *there are*.

*e.g. There **is** an excellent article in this journal = An excellent article **is** in this journal.*

*e.g. There **are** some excellent articles in this journal = Some excellent articles **are** in this journal.*

## **Future tenses**

It is sometimes hard to choose which future tense to use in English, as the differences in meaning can be very small. For example, the future continuous is more informal than the future simple.

*They will leave tomorrow.* (prediction)

*They leave tomorrow.* (formal)

*They are leaving tomorrow.* (planned event; arrangements already made)

*They are going to leave tomorrow.* (planned event; focuses on intention)

*They will be leaving tomorrow.* (less definite; informal)

*They will have left before you arrive tomorrow.* (situates the event before another event)

## **Aspect – for advanced grammar lovers**

The word 'tense' is often used to cover the two terms 'tense' and 'aspect'. 'Tense' refers to the time when something happens (present, past or future). 'Aspect' refers to how we experience the action (as something which is complete, ongoing or happening before another action). In English we usually refer to three aspects: simple, perfect and progressive/continuous.

<b>T i m e</b>	<b>Aspect</b>				
		<b>Simple</b>	<b>Perfect</b>	<b>Progressive/ Continuous</b>	<b>Perfect Progressive/ Continuous</b>
		∅	<b>have + past participle</b>	<b>be + -ing</b>	<b>have + past participle + be + -ing</b>
	<b>Present</b>	play/ plays	has/have played	am/is/are playing	has/have been playing
	<b>Past</b>	played	played	was/were playing	had been playing
	<b>Future</b>	will play	will have played	will be playing	will have been playing

**The simple aspect** is used for facts or strong predictions.

e.g. *I work in the maths department.*

*I cycle to the university every day.*

*I have an exam next week.*

*I submitted my assignment last week.*

*I will study engineering next year.*

**The perfect aspect** is used to indicate that something happened before another point in time and is still relevant at that point in time.

e.g. *I have submitted my report.*

*She had left before we arrived.*

*He will have graduated before we even enrol.*

**The progressive aspect** is used for an event which is not complete, or is temporary or changing.

e.g. *He is busy entering the data. (= at the moment)*

*They are getting harder to approach.*

*She was working on her literature review all night.*

*He will be leaving at 10 am tomorrow.*

Much of the information in this handout is based on Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. 1999, *The Grammar Book*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Heinle & Heinle, USA) and was also used by Julia Miller in a study guide written for the Student Learning Centre at Flinders University.