

Verb Tense Shifts

Student Name: _____

Date: _____

Instructor: _____

Course: _____

About This DLA

Important Note

All the activities (3) in the DLA must be completed in their entirety before meeting with a tutor and receiving credit. Where indicated, complete your work on this sheet. If your instructor wants evidence of this completed DLA, return this form to him or her with the tutor's signature included.

Learning Outcomes

Through computer exercises and other independent work, this activity will help you understand when and how to maintain verb tense consistency and how to correct inappropriate verb tense shifts to improve clarity in your writing.

Activities (approximately 1 hour)

Read the information, complete the activities that follow, and be prepared to discuss your answers when you meet with a tutor.

What Are Verb Tense Shifts?

A shift in verb tenses is **a change in the time frame** within a text. For instance, a writer may use present tense verbs in the beginning of an essay to introduce the definition of a concept and then switch to past tense verbs when describing something that happened or existed in the past only.

Look at the excerpt below and notice the tense of the verbs in bold: *is, combines, was, believe, used, and could practice*.

*(1) Capoeira **is** a typical Brazilian art form that **combines** elements of dance, music, acrobatics, self-defense and combat. (2) It **was** common among slaves in the 19th century. (3) Many **believe** that the slaves **used** the element of dance in capoeira as a disguise so that they **could practice** self-defense techniques without raising suspicion from the slave masters.*

The above excerpt provides examples of CORRECT/appropriate verb tense shifts, and here is why:

1. The author of the above excerpt used **present tense** forms of verbs in sentence #1 to define a concept since the definition is current.
2. In sentence #2, the author shifted the verb tense to **past** since the sentence refers to something that was common in the past and is no longer the case in the present.

3. In sentence #3, the author started off with a **present tense** verb that shows the belief is current. In other words, many people in our time/nowadays believe this. Then the author shifts the verb tense to **past** because the remainder of the sentence refers to things that were done in the past and are no longer the case in the present.

Why Do I Need to Learn about Verb Tense Shifts and What Are Verb Tense Shift Errors?

When we write (and speak), we need to select appropriate verb tenses that reflect the time frames we are referring to. In other words, there needs to be a logical reason/a purpose for changing (shifting) tenses in our writing.

A text that contains inappropriate changes in verb tenses (verb tense shift errors) confuses readers and may change the meaning of the author's intended message.

Take a look at the excerpts below and notice how tense shift errors can confuse readers and obscure the writer's intended meaning.

Inappropriate shift: *There **was** an earthquake and all the cars **are bumping** into one another.*

Correct version: *There **was** an earthquake and all the cars **were bumping** into one another.*

OR: *There **is** an earthquake and all the cars **are bumping** into one another.*

Explanation:

Since the writer used a past tense verb in the first part of the sentence, the reader assumes that the earthquake happened in the past and is no longer in progress. However, the writer shifted the verb tense to the present progressive form in the second part of the sentence, which makes the sentence confusing to readers. If the earthquake happened in the past, how can the cars still be bumping into one another? If the cars are not bumping into one another anymore, the verb tense for the second part of the sentence also needs to be past. On the other hand, if the earthquake is still in progress, then the verb that needs to be changed is the one in the first part of the sentence.

Inappropriate shift: *The soccer match **wasn't** good today. My brother **gets** mad at another player, and he almost **starts** a fight.*

Correct version: *The soccer match **wasn't** good today. My brother **got** mad at another player, and he almost **started** a fight.*

Explanation:

Since the writer used a past tense verb in the first part of the sentence, it is clear that the soccer match has already taken place. Therefore, the verbs in the second sentence also need to be in past tense form since they refer to actions or events that took place during the soccer match (in the past).

How Can I Avoid Verb Tense Shift Errors in My Writing?

The most important thing to keep in mind is to **make sure that any verb tense shift in your writing is intentional and logical**. In other words, do not change the verb tense within your writing if the time frame that you are referring to is the same as in the other verbs you used.

Below is a list that you can use as a reference in order to decide if you are using the correct verb tense for your purpose. (*For more detailed information on each verb tense, please refer to our verb tense DLAs, handouts, and workshops.*)

When the focus is on the present or a connection between past and present:

- When expressing your own ideas or referring to literary work, movies, facts, definitions, habits, routines, hobbies, and places of origin, among others, use the **simple present tense**.

Example: *My neighbor **speaks** three languages.*

- For actions that are ongoing and/or temporary, use the **present progressive tense**.

Example: *Kim **is taking** two classes this semester.*

- For actions or events that occurred at an unspecified time in the past and/or have a connection with the present, among others, use the **present perfect tense**.

Example: *I **have seen** that painting before.*

- For actions that began in the past and are still ongoing, use the **present perfect progressive tense**.

Example: *I **have been cleaning** your room for two hours.*

When the focus is on the past:

- When referring to actions that were completed in the past, or things that were true in the past and are no longer true, use the **simple past tense**.

Example: *Yesterday there **was** a cultural event at my school, and my friends and I **had** a lot of fun.*

- For actions or events that were ongoing in the past, use the **past progressive tense**.

Example: *I **was doing** my homework last night when you called.*

- For actions or events that took place before another action, event, or specific time in the past, use the **past perfect tense**. (Note: This tense is rarely used, so avoid using it on a regular basis.)

Example: *I **had finished** my homework by the time my friends arrived.*

- For actions that were in progress before another action or specific time in the past, use the **past perfect progressive tense**. (Note: This tense is rarely used, so avoid using it on a regular basis.)

Example: *I **had been working** on chapter 3 for two hours when my brother decided to show me the answer key.*

When the focus is on the future:

- When referring to the immediate future, plans for the future, or predictions, among others, use the **simple future tense**.*

Examples: *I **am going to take** English 1A next semester.* (Plan for the future)

*In the next century, robots **will rule** the world.* (Prediction)

(*For information on when to use WILL vs. BE GOING TO vs. other forms for the future tense, please refer to our **Future Tenses—Simple and Progressive DLA**.)

- For an action or event that will be ongoing in the future, use the **future progressive tense**.

Examples: *At 10:00 a.m. tomorrow, I **will be driving** to the beach.*

*In a few minutes, we **are going to be taking** a test.*

- For actions or events that will/won't happen before another action or a specific time in the future, use the **future perfect tense**. (Note: This tense is rarely used, so avoid using it on a regular basis.)

Example: *I have a lot of homework, and I **won't have finished** it when they arrive tomorrow.*

- For actions or events that will/won't be in progress before another action or specific time in the future, use the **future perfect progressive tense**. (Note: This tense is rarely used, so avoid using it on a regular basis.)

Example: *My husband **will have been working** for this company for 38 years by the time he retires.*

Activities

Follow the steps below and be prepared to explain your answers when you meet with a tutor. Please check off each box when you have completed the task.

☐ **1. Review Verb Tense Shifts**

- What is a verb tense shift?

- What is a verb tense shift **error**?

- How can you avoid verb tense shift **errors** in your writing?

☐ 2. Online Quiz

Go to <http://tinyurl.com/VTShiftsDLAQuiz> and take the [Verb Tense Shifts DLA Quiz](#). You must score at least 80% on the exercises before seeing a tutor. After you complete the task, **PLEASE ASK A LAB TUTOR OR FRONT DESK ATTENDANT TO PRINT THE PAGE THAT HAS YOUR SCORE. DO NOT EXIT THE PROGRAM UNTIL THIS PAGE HAS BEEN PRINTED (FREE OF CHARGE)**. If you have any other questions, do not hesitate to ask a lab tutor.

Choose 3a or 3b Below

☐ 3a. Practice with Your Own Writing

Collect samples of your own writing from classes. Underline at least 10 verbs you find in your sentences and decide if they are correct or if there are verb tense shift errors. If there are errors, correct the verb tenses and be prepared to explain the changes you made when you meet with a tutor.

If you do not have sentences from your own writing to work with, please complete the supplemental activity below (3b).

☐ 3b. Correct the Verb Tense Shift Errors

Read the excerpts below and look for verb tense shift errors. Underline the verbs that are wrong and provide a correction above the verb(s). If there are no verb tense shift errors, write "correct" next to the excerpt.

1. Yesterday, we went to a great party in which they had acrobats from a famous circus. Andy arrived late to the party, so he misses the show.
2. By the time they arrived yesterday, it had stopped raining. After they unpacked, we head downtown and visit an art museum with them. It was great!
3. I watched the news last night and hear that my neighbor won the lottery last week. Now I understand why she moved out without saying good bye.
4. In Vietnam, when a baby is born, there were many rules. When the baby is one month old, no one should visit him or her because it will make the baby sick, especially while he or she was sleeping.

5. Kim and I have been working on a project for our English class for a month. It hasn't been easy to work with her because she often said that she has other plans and can't meet with me when I try to finish the project with her.
6. The Chinese have many beliefs about dreams. When I was a kid, I usually dream of my grandmother after she passed away. I miss her so much, especially after I had those dreams. Then my mom went to the temple to entreat my grandmother to leave me alone.
7. In China, people believe that if you saw a black cat at night, you might experience something bad because they think a black cat is a sign of bad luck.
8. My cousin was confident about his driving skills and kept texting behind the wheel, and it was the longest time of my life as I kept imagining myself getting into an accident because of his stupidity. When I argue with him to put the phone down and focus on the road, he was rude and yell that nothing will happen.

☐ 4. Review the DLA

Go to <https://mtsac2.mywconline.com> and use the [Mt. SAC Writing Center Appointment System](#) to make a DLA appointment, or sign-up to see a tutor on the "**DLA Walk-in**" list in the Writing Center. During your session with a tutor, explain your understanding of verb tense shifts and some strategies you can use to avoid tense shift errors in your writing.

Student's signature: _____

Date: _____

Tutor's Signature: _____

Date: _____

If you are an individual with a disability and need a greater level of accessibility for any document in The Writing Center or on The Writing Center's website, please contact the Mt. SAC Accessible Resource Centers for Students, access@mtsac.edu, (909) 274-4290.

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