

A Brief Guide To Verb Tense And Voice In Scientific Writing

A. Present Tense

Use present tense:

1. To describe something that is happening now:

- **Appendix A summarizes the results of the survey.**

2. To describe published research, articles or books whose conclusions you believe are currently valid and relevant. It doesn't matter whether the publication is recent or centuries old:

- **Malone (2003) discusses nursing care in the context of nested proximities.**
- **In her *Notes on Nursing* (1860), Florence Nightingale includes practices for cleanliness and observation of the sick.**

3. To indicate a general truth or fact, a general law, or a conclusion supported by research results. In other words, something that is believed to be always true:

- **The provincial government regulates the delivery of health care. [fact]**
- **For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. [law]**
- **Our results demonstrate that cimetidine can improve mean fat absorption in adolescents with cystic fibrosis. [conclusion]**

4. To describe an apparatus (because it always works the same way):

- **This temperature gauge gives an accurate reading in all weather conditions.**

5. To state research objectives: [note: past tense is also commonly used]

- **The purpose of this study is to examine imagery use by elite athletes.**

B. Simple Past Tense

Use simple past tense:

1. To describe something that began and ended in the past, e.g., the Methods or Results sections of a research report:

- **We administered four doses daily to 27 participants for 14 days.**
- **The transgenic plants showed up to eight-fold PAL activity compared to control.**

2. To describe previous work on which the current work is based:

- **Smith et al.'s (2005) study collected data on the drug's effect in a pediatric population similar to ours.**

3. To describe a fact, law, or finding that is no longer considered valid and relevant:
 - Nineteenth-century physicians **held** that women **got** migraines because they **were** “the weaker sex,” but current research **shows** that the causes of migraine **are** unrelated to gender.

Note the shift here from past tense (discredited belief) to present (current belief).

4. To state research objectives: [note: present tense is also commonly used]
 - The purpose of this study **was** to examine imagery use by elite athletes.

C. Perfect Tense

This tense is formed with the auxiliary [“helping”] verb **have** plus the main verb:

1. Use a **present perfect tense** to describe something that began in the past and continues to the present:
 - Hassanpour **has studied** the effects of radiation treatment since 1982. [and still does]
 - Researchers **have demonstrated** a close link between smoking and morbidity rates.
2. Use a **past perfect tense** to describe an action completed in the past before a specific past time:
 - Nightingale **had begun** her reforms of nursing practice prior to the Crimean War.

D. Future Tense

Use future tense in outlines, proposals, and descriptions of future work:

- The proposed study **will examine** the effects of a new dosing regimen. Twenty-seven participants **will receive** four doses daily for 14 days.

E. Progressive Tense

Use a progressive tense for an action or condition that began at some past time and is continuing now. It is formed from the auxiliary verb **be** plus a present participle. A progressive form emphasizes the continuing nature of the action:

- **I am collecting** data from three sites this month.

In places where conciseness is important (such as an abstract), it is often possible to use a simple verb form instead:

- With this new method, we **are attempting** to demonstrate....
- With this new method, we **attempt** to demonstrate....

F. Active and Passive Voice

Active (direct) voice: The normal pattern of English sentences is subject—verb—object, which we call active voice:

- Southern analysis indicated a single site of insertion.

Passive (indirect) voice reverses the order (object—verb—subject). Passive voice is constructed by using a form of the verb **be** followed by a past participle (**-ed**). The phrase “by [the subject]” is included or implied:

- A single site of insertion was indicated by Southern analysis.
- Southern analysis was performed [by us] and a single site of insertion was indicated [by the analysis].

Use passive voice:

1. to de-emphasize the subject in favour of what has been done:

- Red or blue outfits were randomly assigned to competitors in four elite sports.

2. to discuss background that exists as part of the body of knowledge of the discipline, independent of the current author:

- Colour is thought to influence human mood, emotions and expressed aggression.

As a general principle, use active voice in preference to passive. It is both more direct and more concise:

- Chen performed the experiment in 2006.
- The experiment was performed by Chen in 2006.