

**A SHORT-CUT TO UNDERSTANDING TENSES by Ilse Evertse**  
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These notes are focussed on the use of tenses as academics need to use them.

## **I Present Tense**

- a) This tense is used when an event occurs in the present time and something is generally regarded as true.

Currently, there **are** many studies that **focus** on...  
Although this study was done in 1970, it **is** still applicable

- b) Using the Present Tense when telling a “story”, such as when writing a case study, makes it more interesting:

John Smith, CEO of Ajax and Co., **thrusts** his hands deep into his pockets, **walks** to the window **stares** down at the hustle and bustle below him. He **is** very worried.

### **Exceptions and specific use**

- a) Currently, academics also use the Present Tense when doing a literature review, as it is argued that if you use the Past Tense, this means that the findings of the authors whose work you are reviewing are no longer applicable.

Black and White (1970) **maintain** that the best method **is**....  
Brown and Black (2005) **indicate** that..., although White and Brown (2006) **prove** that...

- b) Using the Present Tense to indicate what is coming (i.e. the Future Tense) is also far more reader friendly **if** you use it correctly. The best example is when describing a paper, dissertation or book’s outline:

This paper **is** structured as follows: In the first section, the background to ... **is** provided, which **is** followed by a literature review. The following section **describes** the methodology and .... A recommendation for practice **concludes** the paper.

## **II Present Perfect Tense**

This tense is mostly used **together with** the Present Tense. It is safe to say that when you use the Present Tense, you are at some time or another going to need to use the Present Perfect Tense

- a) Use it when there is **no definite indication of time in the present**:

There **have been** many studies on this topic.

This argument **has lead** to a great many counterarguments.

- b) Use it when using “time words” such as **since, ever, never, just**, etc.

Throughout this examination, we **have never been** able to verify that Black’s assertion is true ....

Since the acceptance of the *abc* theory, scholars **have used** it to verify whether...

- c) Use it when one event happens **before** or **after** another event in the present. Note that the action that occurs first is in the **Present Perfect Tense** and the most recent one is in the **Present Tense**:

Although the findings by Black and White (1970) **have been** verified, Brown (2000) **insists** that they cannot be applied in every instance.

While there **have been** many prior studies on..., none of them **focuses** on...

Once the team **has reached** consensus on the questions, the survey **is** undertaken.

- d) Use it when one event clearly occurred **before** or **after** in the past and another in the present. Note that the action that occurs first is in the **Past Tense** and the most recent one is in the **Present Perfect Tense**:

Since White’s findings **were** published in the 1990s, there **have been** a great number of studies on this topic.

In the 1990s, many studies **focussed** on ..., but none of them **has been** empirically validated

#### IV Present Continuous Tense

There is **no** need to use this tense (am/are/is + ing) in academic writing, unless your knowledge of English is extremely good. I realise that most non-English academics seem to know this tense the best, but do **not** use it!

**not** *This paper is discussing various aspects of* **but** *This paper discusses various aspects of*

#### V Future Tense

This is not a tense (shall/will + infinitive) with which academics have trouble.

#### VI Past Tense

Very few academics have trouble with this tense. Please remember, though, that the Past Tense of build = built, lend = lent, bend = bent.

This tense is used when an event occurred in the past or a fact was generally accepted in the past.

In the 1960s, there **were** studies that **seemed** to prove that smoking **was** harmless...

This study **was** undertaken before the dotcom crash...

This examination **was** carried out in June 2005

## VII Past Perfect Tense

This tense is mostly used **together with** the Past Tense (as the Present Perfect is used together with the Present Tense). It is safe to say that when you use the Past Tense, you are at some time or another going to need to use the Past Perfect Tense

- a) Use it when there is **no definite indication of time in the past**:

Before White's study, there **had not been** many studies on this topic  
This argument **had lead** to a great many counterarguments

- b) Use it when one event happened **before or after** another event in the past.  
Note that the action *further in the past*, is in **the Past Perfect Tense** and the one closer, is in the **Past Tense**:

After the team **had reached** consensus on the questions, the survey **was** undertaken and **posted** in May 2007.

White's findings **had first been** published in June 2000, after which there **were** a great many responses in various journals.

Prior to Black's study, which **was** published in 2000, there **had never been** any other on this topic.

Throughout our examination, we **had never been** able to verify that Brown's

....

### Mixing tenses when writing

Do remember that you will sometimes have to use quite a few tenses.

This research **was** undertaken in the summer of 2007 after Brown's study on *efg* (2006) **had been** published. The first step **was** to undertake a survey, which **is** an accepted approach for studying *efg*. Many prior studies **have** also **indicated** that a survey **is** an appropriate method. By applying this approach, it **was** possible to establish whether *x* and *z* **are** comparable, which scholars **have** always **doubted**.