

Shifts in verb tense

Verbs not only tell you the action in a sentence, they tell you when that action happened. This is called tense. The basic tenses are **simple present**, **simple past**, and **simple future**. Here they are conjugated with the verbs to walk, to ride, and to be.

Simple Present

Singular

First person- I walk, ride, am
 Second person- you walk, ride, are
 Third person- s/he/it walks, rides, is

Plural

First person- we walk, ride, are
 Second person- you walk, ride, are
 Third person- they walk, ride, are

Simple Past

Singular

First person - I walked, rode, was
 Second person - you walked, rode, were
 Third person- s/he/it walked, rode, was

Plural

First person - we walked, rode, were
 Second person - you walked, rode, were
 Third person - they walked, rode, were

Simple Future

For all will walk, will ride, will be

There are many other tenses, but the most commonly used tenses besides the simple tenses are the perfect tenses. Perfect tenses indicate more complex time relations. The **present perfect** tense is used for an event that started in the past and is still going on in the present. The **past perfect** tense indicates that something happened long ago, even further in the past than the simple past tense. The action of the verb in the past perfect ended before the action of the verb in the simple past even began. The **future perfect** tense describes an action that will be completed before or at the same time as another action in the future.

Present Perfect

First and second person, singular and plural have walked, have ridden, have been
Third person singular (plural is as above) has walked, has ridden, has been

Past Perfect

For all had walked, had ridden, had been

Future Perfect

For all will have walked, will have ridden, will have been

Distracting Shifts

When you are writing, actions that happen in the same time should all be in the same tense. You should only change verb tense when there is a reason to do so. Unnecessary shifts in verb tense will confuse readers.

My grandpa was the only one who went to parents' night at school or goes to my baseball games.

"Went" is the simple past of to go, and "goes" is the simple present. Yet both actions happened in the same time frame. They should be in the same tense.

Literature conventions

Most often we write in the simple past tense. However, when you are writing about literature- poems, novels, essays, etc.- the convention is to use the simple present tense.

The scarlet letter is placed upon Hester's breast as a punishment, yet it is also a fanciful and imaginative product of her own needlework.

Don't rely on your computer! Grammar checkers usually do not notice shifts in verb tense. *My three-year-old fell into the pool and to my surprise she swims to the shallow end.* I just wrote that on my computer and it didn't mark the sentence as having a problem.

Shifts in Verb Tense Exercise

name:

Edit the following paragraphs to eliminate distracting shifts in tense.

The English colonists who settled in Massachusetts received assistance at first from the local Indian tribes, but by 1675, there had been friction between the English and the Indians for many years. On June 20 of that year, Metacomet, whom the colonists called Philip, leads the Wampanoag tribe in the first of a series of attacks on the colonial settlements. The war, known today as King Philip's War, rages on for over a year and leaves three thousand Indians and six hundred colonists dead. Metacomet's attempt to retain power in his native land failed. Finally he too is killed, and the victorious colonists sell his wife and children into slavery.

The Indians did not leave records of their unfortunate encounters with the English settlers, but the settlers recorded some of their experiences at the hands of the Indians. One of the few accounts to survive was written by a captured colonist, Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. She is a minister's wife who is kid-napped by an Indian war party and held captive for eleven weeks in 1676. Her history, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, tells the story of her experiences with the Wampanoags. Although it did not paint a completely balanced picture of the Indians, Rowlandson's narrative, which is considered a classic early American text, showed its author to be a keen observer of life in an Indian camp. Yet readers must keep in mind that her descriptions, while full of specific details, were very subjective.