

CONSISTENT VERB TENSE

Verbs express a particular action (*throw*) or state of being (*was*). In addition, verbs help express who or what performs the action (person), how many people or things perform the action (number), the speaker's attitude toward or relation to the action (mood), and whether the subject is the giver or receiver of the action (voice). Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of verbs, however, is how the verb *tenses* express *time*.

Different verb forms are used in combination to express when actions occur. The simple present, past, and future tenses simply place events in time. The perfect tenses (they occur with *have, has, and had*) express events or actions completed; the progressive tenses (*-ing* verbs used together with helpers such as *is, was, and were*) show actions or events that are continuing.

Unintentional shifting of verb tense.

When verb tenses shift for no good reason, meaning becomes garbled. In general, avoid unnecessary changes in verb tense. This is a particular problem in personal narratives, where it is common to see something like this:

*I **was** undecided about my major when I **was** a freshman. I **wanted** to study journalism but I **like** art, too. I **find** that sketching is relaxing and **helped** reduce stress, while journalism **was** a high-energy, often stressful class.*

The verb shifts are unnecessary and make it more difficult for the reader to follow. Here is the statement revised to a consistent past tense:

*I **was undecided** about my major when I **was** a freshman. I **wanted** to study journalism but I **liked** art, too. I **found** that sketching **was** relaxing and **helped** reduce stress, while journalism **was** a high-energy, often stressful class.*

In personal narratives, you may choose to use either past or present tense verbs. Just do not mix them as this writer did:

*He **turns** the key in the ignition, but only **heard** the relentless, useless chugging of an engine unwilling to turn over. He **glanced** left, then right. He **cannot see** the approaching train through the driving rain, but he **could hear** it, a low moaning wail still distant enough that he **thought** he still might be able to save the car.*

Revised to a consistent past tense, this story is more coherent:

*He **turned** the key in the ignition, but only **heard** the relentless, useless chugging of an engine unwilling to turn over. He **glanced** left, then right. He **couldn't see** the approaching train through the driving rain, but he **could hear** it, a low moaning wail still distant enough that he **thought** he still might be able to save the car.*

In this case, however, you might be more successful in recreating the suspense of the moment by keeping to a consistent present tense:

He **turns** the key in the ignition, only **to hear** the relentless, useless chugging of an engine unwilling to turn over. He **glances** left, then right. He **cannot see** the approaching train through the driving rain, but he **can hear** it, a low moaning wail still distant enough that he **thinks** he still might be able to save the car.