



Tips for Using Verb Tenses in Academic Writing

Here are some general guidelines for three important tenses used in academic writing: **simple present**, **present perfect**, and **simple past**. Note that different reference styles (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.) may have their own preferences with regard to verb tense usage, so always check your style guide, too.

Simple Present Tense is used to describe claims, arguments, and implications. You can use it when summarizing your argument or thesis (or other writers' arguments or theses); making a claim about what your results reveal; and/or discussing "big-picture" implications of your work.

Examples:

- ✓ Scholars in psychology **argue** that sleep deserves more attention as a topic for empirical study.
- ✓ This result **suggests** a correlation between adequate sleep and mental focus.

Present Perfect Tense is often used to summarize existing research because one of its main functions is to link the past to the present. Think about the question: *What research has already been done?*

Example:

- ✓ Scholars in psychology **have found** that sleep deprivation correlates with reduced mental focus.

Simple Present Tense is also used when you are analyzing plot events, narration, or dialogue in literature. Refer to the focal moment in the text in simple present, but to refer to an earlier scene or moment, use **present perfect**.

Example:

- ✓ In *The Great Gatsby*, although Jordan **has demonstrated** her carelessness on several occasions, she ironically **claims** to "hate careless people" (Fitzgerald 58).

Simple Past Tense is used to describe historical or biographical events in the past. It is also often used to describe methods (what the researchers did) and to report findings (what the researchers found).

Examples:

- ✓ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, industrialization **changed** the way Americans **worked**.
- ✓ We **surveyed** 100 undergraduate students who self-identified as not receiving adequate sleep. More than half of respondents **mentioned** sleeping fewer than six hours each night.

