

The Three Common Tenses Used in Academic Writing

He explains the author's intention and purpose in the article.

**He is explaining the author's intention and purpose in the article.*

Both of the sentences above are grammatically correct. However, the tense used in first sentence (present simple) is more common for academic writing than the tense in the second sentence (present progressive). This handout provides the overview of three tenses that are usually found in academic writing.

The information in this handout is adapted from Caplan, N. (2015). *Grammar choices for graduate and professional writers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Background

There are three tenses that make up 98% of the tensed verbs used in academic writing. The most common tense is present simple, followed by past simple and present perfect. These tenses can be used both in passive and active voice. Below are the main functions that these three tenses have in academic writing.

The Present Simple Tense

Present simple is the most common tense in academic writing, and it is usually considered as the “default” unless there is a certain reason to choose another tense (e.g. a sentence contains a past time marker). Some specific functions of present simple include:

Functions	
1) To frame a paper. It is used in introductions to state what is already known about the topic, and in conclusions to say what is now known.	Scholars share a common argument that engineering is the most male dominated of all professions. Timing of college enrollment is associated with a number of variables.
	This paper analyses the impact of high temperatures on certain species.
3) To make general statements, conclusions, and interpretations about findings of current or previous research. It focuses on what is known now.	Graduate school is regarded as crucial for starting an engineering career because failure at this stage closes the door to professional engineering careers, and later career trajectory change is more difficult the longer it is delayed.
4) To refer to findings from previous studies without mentioning the author's name.	Children ingest roughly 50-200 mg soil/day [2,3].
5) To refer to tables or figures.	Table 1 presents the structural units.
6) To describe the events or plot of a literary work. This usage has the name “Narrative present”.	In Mansuji Ibuse's <i>Black Rain</i> , a child reaches for a pomegranate in his mother's garden, and a moment later he is dead, killed by the blast of an atomic bomb.

The Past Simple Tense

Generally, past simple is used to refer to actions completed in the past. Some specific functions this tense has in academic writing include:

Functions	Example
1) To report specific findings of a previous study (usually with the authors' names in the sentence) to support a general statement.	Probably the most commonly discussed phenomenon in music cognition is the Mozart Effect (this is the general claim). (Specific example) Rauscher and colleagues first documented this effect in their seminal paper.
2) To describe the methods or data from a completed experiment.	Statistical analyses were used to determine relationships between variables.
3) To report results of the current empirical study.	The L1-English writers utilized mostly NP- and PP-based bundles (78.3% of types and 77.1% of tokens).
3) After any past time marker.	After the war, Germany had to face strong reparations from the allied nations.

The Present Perfect Tense

Present perfect is usually used when referring to previous research, and since it is a present tense, it indicates that the findings are relevant today. More specifically, this tense might have the following functions:

	Examples
1) To introduce a new topic. Could also be used to introduce a new report or paper.	There has been a large body of research regarding the effect of carbon emissions on climate change.
2) To summarize previous research with general subjects (such as "researchers have found...") Present perfect places emphasis on <i>what has been done</i> rather than on <i>what is known to be true</i> (present simple).	Some studies have found that girls have significantly higher fears than boys after trauma (Pfefferbaum et al., 1999; Pine and Cohen, 2002; Shaw, 2003).
3) To point out a "gap" in existing research: to make a connection between the past (what has been found) and the present (how will you add more to the field).	While these measures have proved to be reliable and valid predictors of what they are measuring, there is little data on how they relate to each other.
4) To describe previous findings without referring directly to the original paper.	It has been shown that biodiversity is not evenly distributed throughout the world.

Common Questions about Tense in Academic Writing

Question: Can tenses change in the same paragraph or sentence?

Explanation: Yes, there are some times where it is appropriate to switch tense within a paragraph or sentence. However, you have to have a good reason for it. For instance, a shift in time marked by an adverb or prepositional phrase (e.g. *since, in 2013, until*) or when you move from general statements to specific examples from research (one of the functions mentioned above).

Question: Are other verb tenses used in academic writing?

Explanation: Yes, although not as common, other tenses are used in academic writing as well. For example, when expressing strong predictions about the future, the future simple tense is used, or when describing events that undergo changes at the time of writing, present progressive is used.

Practice

Read the excerpt and notice the tenses used for each verb. Identify the function of each tense as illustrated in the first sentence.

Approximately 10% of the population **is diagnosed** (*present simple, function 4*) with dyslexia (Habib, 2000). Specialized testing most often **reveals** this disability in third grade or later, when there **develops** an observable differential between reading achievement and IQ (Wenar & Kerig, 2000). This late identification **poses** severe problems for effective remediation. At the time of diagnosis, poor readers **are** on a trajectory of failure that **becomes** increasingly difficult to reverse. Attempts at intervention must both focus on remediation of the impaired components of reading as well as extensive rehabilitation to reverse the growing experience differential.

Educators and researchers **are** aware of the need for early diagnosis. In response, research investigating early correlates of later reading ability/disability **has burgeoned** (e.g. Wagner et al., 1997). However, these early reading studies primarily **focus** on school age children (e.g. Share et al., 1984). To date, only a few studies **have focused** on the reading trajectories of children younger than preschool, and there **is** little consistency within the existing studies (e.g. Scarborough, 1990, 1991).

In the current study, we **trace** the development of the two aspects of the phonological processing deficit in a longitudinal follow-up study of two-year-olds. Shatz et al. (1996, 1999, 2001) **investigated** the underlying lexical structure in two-year-old children. Although their experiments **were tailored** to examine early word learning behavior, their study design **is** uniquely **suited** to looking at the phonological processing skills of two-year old children as well. In this study, we **measure** the early reading skills of these same two-year-olds at five to seven years of age in order to determine the predictivity of the early two-year old behaviors for later reading ability.

Adapted from Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers. (2009). Ann Arbor, MI: The Regents of the University of Michigan.

Last updated 12/20/2017

Answers