

Verb Tenses

When to use the different verb tenses in academic writing can be difficult to decide. Below are some examples of their use in essays (page 1) and reports (page 2).

In essays

Use present tense: To make generalisations about your topic or other authors' views

For example:	Two artefacts provide insight into ancient Hindu culture. Marxist historians argue that class conflicts shape political affairs.
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To cite an author or to refer to what an author says (even if the author is dead)

For example:	Shakespeare depicts the fight for Troy as a war without glory. Pauli's exclusion principle states that no two electrons can have the same four quantum numbers.
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For your interpretations (opinions) and the interpretations of others

For example:	The "White Australia Policy", which ended in 1973, represents one of the darkest periods of European settlement in Australia.
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To describe events in fiction or films

For example:	In the Lord of the Rings' trilogy, Aragon encounters numerous misfortunes throughout his travels. In the Iliad, finally the gods freely intervene on behalf of both the Trojans and the Greeks.
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To describe an idea or fact that is always true

For example:	Genetic information is encoded in DNA. Previous research showed that children confuse the source of their memories more than adults (Lindsay et al, 1991).
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Use past tense in Essays:

For completed actions that have occurred in the past

For example:	Hemingway drew on his experiences in World War I in constructing the character of Jake Barnet. Dulay and Burt conducted their studies in the early seventies.
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Verb tense consistency

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Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is available in Welsh.

Keep tenses consistent within your text. The same context or event usually requires the same tense

For example:	The film <i>Clueless</i> told tells the story of Cher Horowitz, a good-natured but superficial girl. Cher is attractive, popular, and extremely wealthy.
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When changing tenses in a paragraph, use 'signalling words' or time phrases, e.g. since then, currently, now, in the past / future

For example:	Since then Ellis (1992) reports that Dulay and Burt's (1974) conclusions on second language acquisition are ...
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In reports

When writing about an experiment/investigation that is already finished, use the past tense:

For example:	The objective of this investigation was ... The resistance was measured, after which the results were compared with the colour code value.
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For anything that still exists, such as the theory, the report and permanent equipment, use the present tense:

For example:	Bragg's Law for diffraction is ... Mahoney and Pandian (1992) capture this idea by distinguishing between ... In a similar fashion Giddons (1984 p.xviii) seeks to 'distance' himself from the position.
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Sometimes in a report you have to use both present and past tense in the same section:

For example: <i>Extract from a Discussion section</i>	The first noticeable difference between the four subjects was the varied levels of ventilation. Subject 1, (male), who consistently recorded the lowest levels of ventilation, considered himself to be reasonably fit. He was a rugby player and exercised five or more times a week, performing a mixture of endurance and strength training routines. According to Bowers and Fox (1988) lung volumes are generally larger in athletes than in non-athletes of the same gender, height and body size. This increase may be as a result of the increased strength of the skeletal muscles responsible for ventilation but it is not thought that regular exercise has any direct effect on lung volume.
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References and further reading:

Adapted from: Swan, M. (2005). *Practical English usage*. Oxford: OUP.

MMU Cheshire (2008) *Discussion samples – laboratory report writing*. Available at:

<http://www.cheshire.mmu.ac.uk/exspsci/home/students/lab-report/samples/discus.php>

(Accessed: 28 February 2010).