

Verb tense in academic papers

Tenses (all verb tenses also possible in the continuous (...ing) form.

Simple Present: Smith shows ...

Present perfect: Smith has shown...

Simple Past: Smith showed ...

In general

Copy the tenses generally used in papers in the journal you are writing for.

If you cannot identify a consistent use of tenses, then

- use the past tense to refer to what has been done and is finished
- use the present tense to refer to
 - things that continue to be true
 - things you believe and
 - things the data suggest.

Abstract

Use the verb tense appropriate to the section of the paper the sentence refers to e.g. if the sentence is about established facts, use the present tense; if you are reporting your methods, use the past tense.

Introduction

Literature review

- Use the present tense to report established facts.
- Use the present tense when a particular result, figure or paper is the subject of the sentence.
 - *The article by Smith shows*
- Use the present perfect to refer to previous studies that are still relevant today or to studies that started in the past but continue until today (e.g. surveys).
- Use the present perfect to refer to facts that are unknown or controversial
 - e.g. *Many asthmatic children have developed their illness due to being exposed to cigarette smoke or road traffic or as a result of their diet. The effect of parental smoking on wheezing and asthma in children is well established (1,2), but evidence that asthma is more common in children living close to a main road (3-5) has not yet been confirmed (6,7). Several dietary factors have been linked to asthma (8), whereby eating fruit appears to reduce the likelihood of asthma (9-13).*
- Use the past tense to describe what previous researchers found out or did.
- A combination of tenses can be used in one sentence e.g. *Smith's results showed how $X = Y$; however, more recent work has indicated that the opposite might be true.*

General information about tense in the literature review (Taken from <http://monash.edu/lls/llonline/writing/general/lit-reviews/3.2.xml>)

You should be aware that you can use tenses to indicate more than chronology.

- You can use the past tense in reporting others' research to indicate that that research is of secondary importance to your current work.
- You can use the present perfect to indicate that the research is of more direct and primary importance.
- You can use the present tense to indicate your general position relative to reported research.

Methods

- Use the past tense.
- Use the past perfect when referring to previous methods.
- Use the present tense to describe how results are presented (*the results are summarized in ...*).
- Mathematical proofs are written using the present tense, because going through the proof occurs at the time of reading (*“From Eqn. 1, we derive the following system of inequalities”*).
- In rare cases, the past progressive tense is needed (*... the resulting mixture was boiling while the gases were identified*).
- The passive voice is often used to avoid the repetition of phrases such as *“we assembled...” “we studied ...”, “we analysed ...”*.

Results

- Use the past tense when you discuss your results
- Use the present tense when you refer to figures/tables/diagrammes or when you refer to your whole paper.
- Use the present tense when you refer to statements of fact arising from the results. (e.g. *Because no further activity was identified in the absence of magnesium, our results indicate that magnesium must be present*).
- Use the present perfect when you refer to results from previous work.

Discussion

- Use the past tense when referring to results or methods.
- Use the present tense when referring to conclusions/what the data suggests.
- Use the future tense to refer to work that should be done in the future.

Conclusion

- Use the present tense except when describing future work (will-future).
- Possibly use the present perfect to describe what has been done – *“...we have demonstrated ...”, “we have shown ...”*.
- Use the will-future for future work *“In the future, we will investigate ...”*.
- Use the present-progressive-future for ongoing work *“We are currently investigating ...”*.
- Use the past tense to describe the way things were when or before the research started *“... we took on the task of ...”*.