

Which Verb Tenses Should I Use in Empirical Writing?

Abstract

Each sentence in the Abstract employs verb tenses in accordance with the section of the paper it describes. Continue reading below for guidelines to help you decide which tenses to use in each section of your paper.

Introduction

The Introduction usually includes a mix of verb tenses.

The **present tense** is used to introduce beliefs and facts currently accepted by most scholars in the field.

- *A typical adult human body contains [simple present] 206 bones.*

Also use the **present** when the subject of the sentence is a specific paper, result, or figure, as this published information is still available to readers.

- *Smith's pioneering study on the cognitive abilities of chimpanzees lays [simple present] the groundwork for current research on primate intelligence.*

To report results or data that were gathered in the past but are still considered to be valid, use the **present perfect**.

- *Researchers have demonstrated the effects of stereotype threat on students' academic success.*
- *Frequent exposure to sun rays has been shown to increase the risk of developing skin cancer. (Note: This example employs the **passive** form.)*

Use the **past tense** to describe specific methods employed in a previous study.

- *Johnson and Cohn collected [simple past] X-ray images from 150 patients before and after orthodontic treatment to analyze the effectiveness of vibration therapy.*

When presenting information no longer held to be true, use the **past tense**.

- *Before the time of Louis Pasteur, many people believed [simple past] that some organisms arose [simple past] from non-living matter in a process called spontaneous generation.*

Methods

The methods section generally employs the **past tense** since it outlines the actions that were undertaken during the study.

- *The research team generated [simple past] a list of open-ended biographical interview questions. Investigators compared [simple past] the results with those of the control group.*

Use the **past perfect** to specify that an action in the past occurred before another action in the past.

- *Leaders asked [simple past] participants who had chosen [past perfect] not to complete the first task to leave the room.*

To describe an action that happened while another was occurring simultaneously, you may use the **past progressive**.

- *While the investigator was preparing the experiment [past progressive], the participants read and signed a consent form [simple past].*

Often, the Methods section is written in the **passive** form, placing more emphasis on the actions undertaken than on the persons undertaking them.

- *A list of open-ended biographical interview questions was generated.*
- *The results were compared with those of the control group.*
- *Participants who had chosen not to complete the first task were asked to leave the room.*
- *While the experiment was being prepared, the participants read and signed a consent form.*

Results

The Results section also most often employs the **past tense**.

- *Patients who received medication reported [simple past] a reduction in pain levels.*

You may use the **present tense** when referring to the whole study or to specific tables, graphs, results, etc.

- *Our study demonstrates [simple present] that an apple a day does, indeed, keep the doctor away.*
- *Table 1 displays [simple present] the data gathered in Task 1.*

Discussion

Again, use the **past tense** to describe specific methods or results.

Use the **present tense** when presenting the conclusions of the study.

- *This paper illustrates [simple present] the potential of virtual reality technology to revolutionize the medical science field.*

You may use the **future tense** to indicate paths for future research or other developments in the field.

- *Pharmaceutical companies will be able [future] to use the results of this study to improve their current policies and practices.*

Sources/Further Reading:

Mudrak, Ben. 2020. "Verb Tense in Scientific Manuscripts." *American Journal Experts*.
<https://www.aje.com/en/arc/editing-tip-verb-tense-in-scientific-manuscripts/>.

Swales, John M., and Christine B. Feak. 2012. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*, 3rd ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Note: This handout is written in American English. The sources are provided in Chicago author-date style.