

# Verb Tense Consistency

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial defines "verb tense consistency" and describes how it operates. Irregular verbs are also discussed, including the tricky ones that are sometimes a source of difficulty for writers — even experienced writers.

This tutorial examines verb tense consistency in three parts:

1. Verb Tense Consistency
2. Verb Tense Consistency in Practice
3. Irregular Verbs

## 1. Verb Tense Consistency

A **verb** is a word that expresses action, or indicates a state of being. **Tense** is a quality of a verb that indicates the time when an action (i.e., the action expressed by the verb) occurred. Verb tense, therefore, is the time when an action happens.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Verb

A word that expresses action, or indicates a state of being.

### Tense

An indication of the time when an action occurred.

The most commonly-used tenses are *past*, *present*, and *future*. In the English language, verb tense must coincide with sentence tense (i.e., the tense of the sentence of which the verb is a part), unless the verb tense is being used to indicate a shift in time within the sentence. Verb tense should be consistent throughout a written work, unless there's a shift in time within the work.



**EXAMPLE** As your coworker began telling you what she did yesterday, she stated that she "got up, made breakfast, and went to work." All of the verbs she used agree in terms of tense: they are all stated in past tense. However, if she continues her account by saying that she "ate lunch, returned to work, and get a promotion," do you notice any inconsistency in her use of tense?

Although native speakers of English may be amused by misuse of tense, most of them would understand your coworker's meaning. However, listeners or readers whose first language is not English may be confused, perhaps missing your coworkers meaning altogether. Even native users who use tense correctly when speaking, sometimes mix tenses when writing. This is sometimes the result of beginning a written sentence with one idea in mind, and ending it with another.

Verb tense inconsistencies, like those presented in the example above, often go unnoticed by speakers — and writers. They don't realize that they have shifted tense within sentences, between past, present, and future. Careful attention, proofreading, and writing practice help writers to avoid and correct this problem.

---

## 2. Verb Tense Consistency in Practice

Verb tense consistency, like many aspects of the study of grammar, is easier to see than to explain. Following are several examples which demonstrate inconsistency in verb tense:

*Tomorrow he turned 15 years old.*

This sentence contains an error in verb tense. The verb used in the sentence (i.e., the past-tense form of "to turn") must agree with the future tense of the sentence, indicated by "tomorrow," as in the following revision:

*Tomorrow he will turn 15 years old.*

Is there a problem with the verb tense in the following sentence?

*They left for Mexico next week.*

This sentence should not only *sound* wrong, but it should also *look* illogical. It can be corrected by making the tense of the verb "to leave" agree with the tense of the sentence:

*They will leave for Mexico next week.*

The following example is a bit more complicated than the preceding two:

*Even now, years after the breakup, she still loved him.*

Have you spotted the problem? It's at the end of the sentence: "She still *loved* him" doesn't agree with the tense of the sentence. It can be corrected with a revision similar to the following:

*Even now, years after the breakup, she still loves him.*

Sometimes writers make a different kind of mistake when it *seems* to them that verbs should change tense, but they should not. Here's an example:

*Even though I bought the boat last year, I still dreamt about it.*

This sentence would probably sound wrong to you if you had heard it spoken, but you may not have noticed the problem when reading it. Both of the verbs used in the sentence are in past tense so, at first glance, it may seem to be correct. However, the second verb should be in present tense, because the speaker is indicating that he or she continues to dream about the boat *now*:

*Even though I bought the boat last year, I stilldream about it.*

Here is another example:

*Last night's fishing trip was a success, as you can tell by how I smelled right now.*

Although this mistake may seem obvious, writers often mix tenses within sentences like this. They mistakenly assume that since the fishing trip occurred last night, so did the smell. The sentence should be rewritten as follows:

*Last night's fishing trip was a success, as you can tell by how smell right now.*

Try one more example:

*Every time I watch video clips of the day the Titanic sunk, I got chills.*

The last verb in this sentence ("got") should not be in past tense. Sometimes writers assume that past events, including the sinking of the Titanic, mean that all verbs used to discuss them should be in past tense. However, even though the Titanic sunk a long time ago, this writer's "chills" occur in the present. The following revision corrects the problem:

*Every time I watch video clips of the day the Titanic sunk, Iget chills.*



#### BIG IDEA

Most problems with verb tense consistency are easy to spot if you focus on the sentence. When you are reviewing an entire written work, focus on each sentence, one at a time. Read it out loud, if you can. If you do, you may find that problems with verb tense are easier to detect.

---

## 3. Irregular Verbs

Many English verbs don't follow the standard pattern of verb formation. They are called **irregular verbs**.

Following are some examples of commonly-used irregular verbs:

- Think
- Come
- Say
- Drive
- Choose
- Bring
- Go
- Get
- Rise
- See
- Make

- Take
- Write

The preceding list does not include all irregular verbs; there are others that don't change form to express a change in tense in the same way as regular verbs. The past-tense form of these verbs does not end with "ed".

➦ **EXAMPLE** The regular verb "ask" becomes "asked" in past tense. However, "choose" becomes "chose", "make" becomes "made", and "write" becomes "wrote", etc.

The words listed in the preceding example follow different rules for tense changes. Those rules (and exceptions to those rules) are beyond the scope of this tutorial. However, here's one general principle to observe regarding verb tense and irregular verbs: trust your ears. When reviewing what you've written, read out loud when you can. Something like "choosed" should sound wrong to you.


#### HINT

If you're not sure about verb tense consistency in your writing, look up the proper tense usage of suspect verbs. You may learn something!

#### TERM TO KNOW


##### **Irregular Verb**

A verb that does not follow the standard tense pattern for verb formation.

 SUMMARY

This tutorial reviewed verb tense consistency. It explained how verbs change form to express past, present, and future action. Irregular verbs don't observe the same rules of verb formation as regular verbs.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall

 TERMS TO KNOW

**Irregular Verb**  
A verb that does not follow the standard pattern for verb formation.

**Tense**  
Indication of the time in which something occurred.

**Verb**  
A word that defines actions or indicates a state of being.