

Verb Tense Consistency



In good writing, each sentence or paragraph must stay consistent. The most common mistake is switching verb tense. Unnecessary shifts can cause confusion for the reader.

Inconsistent: He points the gun and heard another shot.

The verb “points” indicates the action is taking place in the present, yet the verb “heard” indicates past tense.

Consistent: He pointed the gun and heard another shot.

***NOTE:** Inconsistency is easier to catch in simple sentences, but as you write more complex sentences or paragraphs, thorough editing is required.

Read the following paragraph, which contains several inconsistent verb tenses. Pay special attention to the underlined verbs.

I used to think I want to own a pig. After visiting a farm last summer, I realize that pigs were not for me. I decided to look at other options for pets. I visited a stable, and I love it. I have decided a horse is the perfect pet and felt confident this is the right decision.

Compare the paragraph above to the corrected version below:

I used to think I wanted to own a pig. After visiting a farm last summer, I realized that pigs were not for me. I decided to look at other options for pets. I visited a stable, and I loved it. I decided a horse was the perfect pet and felt confident this was the right decision.

As with all rules, there are exceptions. Sometimes it is appropriate to switch tenses, but there should be a word or phrase to explain the switch. In the following sentence, the reader can understand that the first part of the sentence is about something in the past, but the second part of the sentence is about the present.

Yesterday, I left my jacket in my locker; now I am freezing on my way to school.

Practice. Change the underlined verb to match the other main verb in the sentence.

Example: Mike drives quickly, so we arrived on time. drove

1. I checked the answering machine, but I hear no messages. _____
2. Troy sharpens his pencils while I passed out the test. _____
3. When Brian woke up, he goes straight to the shower. _____
4. Just as Brandi spoke, the microphone turns on. _____
5. I prefer sugar-free gum, but my cousin liked rock candy. _____
6. As Barbara puts in her contacts, the telephone rang. _____
7. She fully intends to do her homework, but she forgot and went out with friends. _____
8. Tim wants to get a job, but he did not know what to do about it. _____
9. The students worked on their projects as we are speaking. _____
10. He looked into the briefcase and finds a small parcel. _____