23.1 UNDERSTANDING SEQUENCE OF TENSES

When a passage has more than one verb, the relation between the tenses of the verbs is called the **sequence of tenses**. Various sequences are possible.

When all the verbs in a sentence describe actions or states that occur at or about the same time, their tenses should be the same:

Whenever the alarm clock **rings**, I **yawn**, **stretch**, and **roll** over for another fifteen minutes of sleep. (all present tense)

The prima donna **opened** her arms to the audience, **smiled**, and **bowed** deeply. (all past tense)

On the other hand, a sentence may describe actions that happen at different times. It will then have verbs in different tenses:

Beth **had been working** on the research project for almost three years before she **made** the first discovery. (past perfect and past)

Recently the largest bank in the area **lowered** its interest rate on loans; the directors **want** to stimulate borrowing. (past and present)

23.2 SEQUENCES IN COMPOUND SENTENCES

A **compound sentence** consists of two or more independent clauses. Since the clauses are independent, the tenses of the verbs may be independent of each other:
In the past, most Americans wanted big cars, but now many drive small ones. (past and present)

The number of finback whales is decreasing; as a result, they will be added to the list of endangered species. (present and future)

I wanted a big raise, but I will be getting a small one. (past and future)

### 23.3 SEQUENCES IN COMPLEX SENTENCES

A complex sentence consists of one independent clause and at least one subordinate clause (see chapter 17). In this kind of sentence, which often deals with two different times, many sequences are possible. The sequence chiefly depends on the tense of the main verb.

#### MAIN VERB IN THE PRESENT

**MAIN VERB**

- Some Americans are so poor that they suffer from malnutrition. (present)
- Most children learn to talk after they have learned to walk. (present perfect)
- Greg likes to boast about the marlin that he caught last summer. (past)
- Astronomers predict that the sun will die in about ten billion years. (future)

#### MAIN VERB IN THE PRESENT PERFECT

**MAIN VERB**

- Scientists have studied the rings of Saturn ever since Galileo discovered them. (past)

**SUBORDINATE VERB**

- Although drivers have complained about the heavy traffic, the police have done nothing to alleviate the problem. (present perfect)


Verbs: Sequence of Tenses

**MAIN VERB IN THE PAST**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAIN VERB</th>
<th>SUBORDINATE VERB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centuries ago most people <em>believed</em></td>
<td>that the sun <em>revolved</em> around the Earth. (past)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copernicus <em>discovered</em></td>
<td>that the Earth <em>revolves</em> around the sun. (present, for statements of timeless truth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recently archaeologists working in Egypt <em>opened</em> a tomb</td>
<td>that <em>had been sealed</em> in about 2500 B.C. (past perfect)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MAIN VERB IN THE PAST PERFECT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBORDINATE VERB</th>
<th>MAIN VERB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By the time Columbus <em>sighted</em> land, (past)</td>
<td>most of his crew <em>had lost</em> all hope of survival.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MAIN VERB INDICATING FUTURE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAIN VERB</th>
<th>SUBORDINATE VERB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People <em>will buy</em> new homes</td>
<td>when interest rates are (or have been) <em>lowered</em>. (present or present perfect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students <em>will get</em> their diplomas</td>
<td>only after they <em>pay</em> (or have paid) their library fines. (present or present perfect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I <em>start</em> my summer job</td>
<td>just as soon as I <em>take</em> (or have taken) my exams. (present or present perfect)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the examples show, the subordinate verb in this kind of sequence is never future in form:

- The building will be demolished when the school year *will end*.
- [or] The building will be demolished when the school year *has ended*.
MAIN VERB IN THE FUTURE PERFECT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAIN VERB</th>
<th>SUBORDINATE VERB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers will have completed repairs</td>
<td>by the time the airport reopens. (present)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the sequence of tenses in the indirect reporting of discourse, see 26.2.

23.4 USING SEQUENCES IN PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph normally includes many verbs and often several different tenses. But you should **shift tenses** in a paragraph only when you have a good reason for doing so.

A well-written paragraph is usually dominated by just one tense. Consider the following example:

Before I set my world record, I was a great fan of *The Guinness Book of World Records* and read each new edition from cover to cover. I liked knowing and being able to tell others that the world’s chug-a-lug champ consumed 2.58 pints of beer in 10 seconds, that the world’s lightest adult person weighed
only 13 pounds, that the largest vocabulary for a talking bird was 531
words, spoken by a brown-beaked budgerigar named Sparky. There is, of
course, only a fine line between admiration and envy, and for awhile I had
been secretly desiring to be in that book myself—to astonish others just as I
had been astonished. But it seemed hopeless. How could a nervous college
sophomore, an anonymous bookworm, perform any of those wonderful
feats? The open-throat technique necessary for chug-a-lugging was incom-
prehensible to my trachea—and I thought my head alone must weigh close
to 13 pounds.

—William Allen, “How to Set a World Record”

The author is describing a past condition, so the dominant tense here is
the simple past, as in was, read, liked, consumed, weighed, and seemed. Mid-
way through the paragraph the author shifts out of the simple past, to ex-
press a general truth in the present tense (there is a fine line) and two con-
ditions that existed before the simple past (had been desiring, had been
astonished). Then the author returns to the simple past with seemed, was,
and thought.

Now consider this paragraph:

February 2, 1975. Wasps begin to appear in country houses about now, and
even in some suburban houses. One sees them dart uncertainly about,
hears them buzz and bang on window panes, and one wonders where they
came from. They probably came from the attic, where they spent the early
part of the winter hibernating. Now with longer hours of daylight, the
wasps begin to rouse and start exploring.

—Hal Borland, “Those Attic Wasps”

This passage describes not a past condition but a recurrent one—some-
thing that happens every year. The dominant tense of the verbs, therefore,
is the present: begin, sees, hears, wonders, begin, start. Since the presence
of the wasps calls for some explanation, the writer shifts tense in the middle
of the paragraph to tell us where they came from and where they spent the
early part of the winter. But in the final sentence, now brings us back to the
present, and the verbs of this sentence, begin and start, are in the present
tense.

The shift of tenses in a sentence is faulty when the tense of any verb differs
without good reason from the tense of the one before it, or when the tense
of a subordinate verb is inconsistent with the tense of the main verb:
The novel describes the adventures of two immigrant families who enter the United States at New York, withstand the stresses of culture shock, and traveled to the Dakota Territory to make their fortune.

Marthe likes to display the miniature spoons she had collected since her marriage to an antique dealer.

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23.6 CORRECTING FAULTY TENSE SHIFTS IN PARAGRAPHS

The shift of tenses in a paragraph is faulty when the tense of a verb differs without good reason from the dominant tense of the paragraph. Consider two examples, the first a commentary on *Green Mansions*, a novel by W. H. Hudson:

[1] On his return to the once peaceful woods, Abel *is horrified* to learn that his beloved Rima *has been slain* by savages. [2] Rage and grief *swell* within him as Kua-kó *tells* how Rima *was forced* to seek refuge in a tree and how
the tree became a trap when the savages sent searing flames and choking smoke high into the branches. [3] As Abel hears of her final cry—“Abel! Abel!”—and fatal plunge to earth, he fought against a wild impulse to leap upon the Indian and tear his heart out.

Since the present tense is normally used in the summary of a literary work (see 22.3), the dominant tense is the present (swell, tells, and hears). There is one shift to the present perfect (has been slain in sentence 1) and four shifts to the past (was forced, became, sent in sentence 2; fought in sentence 3). The shifts in sentences 1 and 2 are correct; the shift in sentence 3 is not. In sentence 1, has been slain tells what has just happened before Abel is horrified to learn about it. In sentence 2, the past-tense verbs describe what happened well before Kua-kó tells about it. But in sentence 3, the verb fought tells what Abel does when he hears of Rima’s death. Fought should be fights.

[1] To understand Marx, we need to know something about the times in which he lived. [2] The period was characterized by revolutionary pressures against the ruling classes. [3] In most of the countries of Europe, there was little democracy, as we know it. [4] The masses participated little, if at all, in the world of political affairs, and very fully in the world of drudgery. [5] For example, at one factory in Manchester, England, in 1862, people work an average of 80 hours per week. [6] For these long hours of toil, the workers generally receive small wages. [7] They often can do little more than feed and clothe themselves. [8] Given these circumstances, it is little wonder that revolutionary pressures were manifest.

—Deliberately altered from Edwin Mansfield, Economics

In sentence 1 the writer correctly shifts from the present tense (need), which signifies the writer’s time, to the past tense (lived), which signifies Marx’s time. In the last part of sentence 3, he correctly returns to the present tense (know) to signify his own time, and then shifts back to Marx’s time with the past tense (participated). But in sentences 5, 6, and 7, the shifts to the present tense (work, receive, can do) are wrong because the verbs refer to past actions; they should be worked, received, and could do. In sentence 8 both tenses are correct. The present tense is signifies the writer’s time, while the past tense were signifies Marx’s time.
Avoiding Faulty Tense Shifts

In discussing literary works, use the common present—not the past—as the dominant tense:

As Macbeth pondered the prophecies, a desire to be king rises within him. He envisioned the crown upon his head and imagined how the Scots would cheer when he sits upon the throne.

In writing about past events from the vantage point of the present, use the past tense for what applies to the past, and the present tense for what applies to the present:

Today many Democrats like to swap stories about Harry Truman, who was noted for his plain speech. He is especially remembered for what he threatens to do after he reads a harsh review of a concert given by his daughter.