Present, Past, and Tense Shifting

Sample Errors

SAMPLE 1: X Whenever we went to a restaurant, my father always makes a fuss about ordering exactly the right wine.

SAMPLE 2: X She went to Trident Technical College, which was in South Carolina.

What's the Problem?

Readers usually expect a piece of writing to maintain a consistent use of tense from beginning to end. For example, in Sample 1, the writer starts in the past tense (we went) and then, for no apparent reason, shifts to the present tense (my father always makes a fuss).

However, sometimes the opposite is true: the sentence is wrong if we don't shift. For example, in Sample 2, the writer needs to shift the past tense was to the present tense is because, as the sentence is written, it implies something that the writer does not mean: that Trident Technical College is no longer in South Carolina.

What Causes the Problem?

Once writers commit themselves to a tense (either present or past), they must stick with it unless there is a reason to shift tenses. Readers find inappropriate tense shifting distracting at best and often misleading. Sometimes, though, as we saw in Sample 2, there are good reasons to shift from one tense to another. The trick, of course, is knowing what these reasons are.

The differences between the past tense and the present tense go beyond just their difference in time. The two tenses have different functions, and we shift between them as we have need of those functions. The past tense is used to describe an event that happened in the past (The phone rang during dinner last night), while the present tense is used to make a statement or generalization that is not tied to a past event (The phone always rings during dinner).

Diagnostic Exercise

Correct all errors in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

Last summer we took a trip to Provence, a region in the southeast corner of France, which bordered on Italy. The name Provence referred to the fact that it was the first province created by the ancient Romans outside the Italian peninsula. Today, Provence still contained an amazing number of well-preserved Roman ruins. While there were a few big towns on the coast, Provence was famous for its wild country and beautiful
scenery. Provence was especially known for its abundance of wildflowers in the spring. These flowers were used to make some of the world's most expensive perfumes. (6)

Fixing This Problem in Your Writing

Your writing needs to show whether you are telling about events that happened and were completed in the past (in which case you would use the *past tense*) or whether you are making a statement of fact or a generalization whose validity is not limited to the past (in which case you would use the *present tense*).

People use the past tense to tell stories. For example, most novels are written in the past tense. The present tense is used for "timeless" statements and generalizations. For example, most nonfiction writing that deals with description or analysis is written in the present tense. (Notice that this paragraph uses the present tense to make a "timeless" generalization.) Writing contains a great deal of tense shifting because the past and present tenses have complementary functions. For example, generalizations (in the present tense) often need the support of concrete examples, which are often descriptions of events (past tense). Stories (past tense) often include generalizations about what happened that are not only true for the time of the story but will continue to be true indefinitely (present tense). Here are two tips that will help you in deciding which tense to use.

**PAST TENSE TIP:** Use the past tense when describing or discussing events that were completed in the past.

Here is the Past Tense Tip applied to Sample 1.

**SAMPLE 1:** *Whenever we went to a restaurant, my father always makes a fuss about ordering exactly the right wine.*

**TIP APPLIED:** Whenever we went to a restaurant, my father always *made* a fuss about ordering exactly the right wine.

In this sentence, both actions (going to the restaurant and making a fuss about ordering) happened in the past. The entire sentence, then, must be written in the past tense.

**PRESENT TENSE TIP:** Use the present tense to make statements of fact or generalizations that are true now and will continue to be true indefinitely unless something happens to change the situation.

Here are the Past Tense and Present Tense Tips applied to Sample 2.

**SAMPLE 2:** *She went to Trident Technical College, which was in South Carolina.*

**TIP APPLIED:** She went to Trident Technical College, which *was* in South Carolina.

In this sentence, a shift in tense is necessary. *She* has finished attending Trident Technical College, so the use of the past tense in this part of the sentence is correct. However, the college is still, and probably will always be, in South Carolina. In the second part of the sentence, the writer must shift to present tense.

Here is another tip to help you remember when to use the present tense.
**HABITUAL-ACTIONS TIP:** Use the present tense to describe habitual or repeated actions.

**EXAMPLE:** Sam is always late for meetings.

This sentence is a generalization about Sam's habitual behavior. It would still be a valid statement even if Sam showed up early for his next meeting.

Here is an example of how to shift from tense to tense according to the meaning you need to express:

**EXAMPLE:** Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1600. The action of the play is set in Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Critics have always considered this one of Shakespeare's most complex plays.

The first sentence is in the past tense because it describes an event (Shakespeare's writing of *Hamlet*) that was completed in the past (Past Tense Tip). The second sentence is in the present tense because it is a "timeless" statement of fact about the setting of the play (Present Tense Tip). The third sentence is in the present tense because it describes the habitual behavior of critics (Habitual-Actions Tip).

### Sentence Practice 1

Correct the present and past tense errors in the following sentences by drawing a line through each error and writing the correct tense above it. If the sentence is correct, write OK above it.

**EXAMPLE:** We all knew that Sacramento was the capital of California.

1. Juan always got a headache whenever he works at the computer without taking a break.

2. In general, the main cause of depressions and unemployment was the reluctance of governments to go into debt to stimulate the economy.

3. Last year, we visited George Washington's plantation. It was located just down the river from Washington.

4. Last year, I was nearly hit by a taxi in London because I forget to look to the right when I step off the curb.

5. Last weekend, we went for a hike on the trail that went through the White Mountain National Forest.

### Sentence Practice 2

Correct the present and past tense errors in the following sentences by drawing a line through each error and writing the correct tense above it. If the sentence is correct, write OK above it.

**EXAMPLE:** When we went on vacation last year, it never get above 50°F.

1. The drainage in the area was awful back then; I always get my feet wet when I go there.
2. It always seemed to rain when we go on vacation.

3. Painters today are still influenced by the art styles that come from prewar Germany.

4. I always use the phone that we installed in the family room.

5. One of the things we remember about Teddy Roosevelt is how he always seems to be grinning with those big white teeth.

Sentence Practice 3

Combine the following sentences by replacing the IT or THAT in the first sentence with the entire second sentence. Change the tense of the second sentence to match the tense of the first.

**EXAMPLE:** I know IT.
   Harry liked Sally.

    likes

   I know Harry liked Sally.

1. We always think IT.
   Summers were hotter than they used to be.

2. I believe IT.
   The plays usually began at 8 o'clock.

3. I am sure THAT.
   Kids liked peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

4. The traffic department's cameras showed THAT.
   Most cars failed to stop at the corner.

5. I know IT.
   Mickey Mouse only had three fingers on each hand.

Editing Practice 1

Correct all errors in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

Last night I discovered how to use the Internet to keep track of my 401k plan. I visited the financial company's Web site, which included a range of resources to help even the most intimidated investor. The first thing I had to do is
establish a personal identification number (or PIN), just like I did when I get a new bank card last year. When I gained access to my account, I am able to check my balance, see how much I contribute each month, and shift my money into different funds. The best feature was that I can use these resources twenty-four hours a day. This beats trying to reach the customer service staff between 9:00 A.m. and 5:00 P.m., especially since I worked until 5:30. (6)

**Editing Practice 2**

Correct all errors in the following paragraphs using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

Although William Shakespeare died in 1616, performances of his plays are alive and well today. A number of theaters and summer festivals were devoted to performing his plays. In England, the Royal Shakespeare Company performed in London and Stratford-upon-Avon (the small town where Shakespeare was born). In Canada, there was a highly successful Shakespeare festival every summer in Stratford, Ontario. In the United States, there were theatrical organizations devoted to performing Shakespeare's plays in Washington, D.C., New York, San Diego, and the small college town of Ashland, Oregon. (4)

Ashland's Shakespeare Festival begins almost by accident as an outgrowth of the old Chautauqua circuit that provides entertainment to rural America before the days of radio and movies. After the collapse of Chautauqua, Ashland finds itself with a good-sized summer theater facility, and faculty from the college decide to stage a few Shakespearean plays. (4)

**Editing Practice 3**

Correct all errors in the following paragraphs using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

A few years ago, I was a juror in a murder trial. The defendant was a member of the local mob who was accused of conspiring to kill the head of another gang. The prosecution's entire case rested on the testimony of a
police informant who had been a friend of the accused. According to the judge, the rules of evidence in a conspiracy case were quite different from the rules governing evidence when the defendant was accused of actually committing a criminal act. (2)

The process of jury deliberation was very interesting. As we discussed the evidence, we had amazingly different recollections about what we had heard. We even have different memories of basic factual information. What was remarkable was that we eventually reached a consensus and delivered a verdict that we all feel was fair. (2)

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### Editing Practice

**Identify Problems with Verb Tenses and Tense Shifting**

- Identify the verb in your sentence.
- Ask yourself whether you are telling about an event that happened and was completed in the past or whether you are making a statement of fact or a generalization.

**Correct Problems with Verb Tenses and Tense Shifting**

- Use the past tense when describing or discussing events that happened and were completed in the past.
- Use the present tense to make statements of fact or generalizations that are true now and will continue to be true in the future.
- If your sentence combines a description of a past event with a generalization, you need to shift from the past tense to the present tense within the sentence.

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**Keep** the verbs in a sentence in the same tense unless you **have** a reason for shifting tenses.