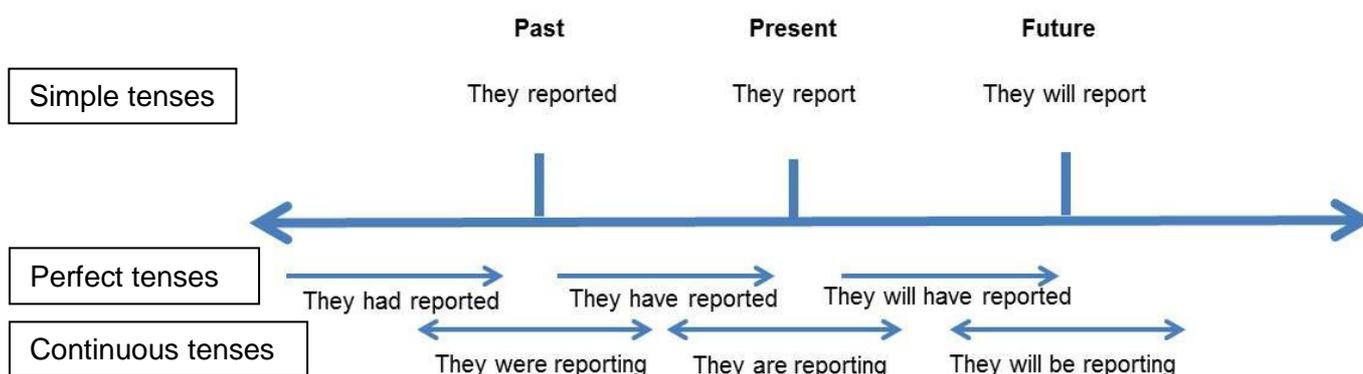


Tenses

Verb tense communicates *when* events occur relative to the time a statement is made. It indicates whether these events are in the past, present or future, and also whether they are open (i.e., ongoing) or closed (i.e., confined to a particular period or moment in time).

The timeline below provides an overview of what time periods the most commonly used verb tenses represent.¹ As the diagram illustrates, the simple tenses are closed and communicate an action of a specific duration, while perfect and continuous tenses convey an open-ended time frame (and thus are “open”).



The most frequently used tenses in academic writing are *past simple*, *present simple* and *present perfect*. *Future simple* is also used fairly often, especially in the context of forward-looking documents such as research proposals. The continuous tenses are commonly used in spoken English, but are generally considered too informal for academic writing. Please note that conventions vary by discipline, referencing style and markers/supervisors, so judgement is also required. Most importantly, your choice of verb tense must be consistent² and logical throughout each piece of work you produce.

Past simple tense

Use this tense to:

- write about historical events that occurred in the past and have finished.
 - 56% of New Zealanders **voted** to retain the current flag in a 2016 referendum.
- report on *methods* or *results* in your own or in previously published research [What did you/they do? What did you/they find?].

The researchers **tested** the effect of regular exercise on cognitive decline.

The results **showed** a negative correlation between exercise and cognitive decline.

¹ Timeline adapted from The University of Adelaide (n.d.). Tenses in Academic Writing. *English for Uni*. Retrieved from <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/english-for-uni/tenses/>.

² Consistency does not necessarily mean that the same tense should be used throughout a sentence. Sentences with more than one clause often feature multiple tenses; the key is to ensure that the tense accurately reflects the time frame of each clause.

Present simple tense

Use this tense to:

- state facts.
The Puaka-James Hight Central Library **is** the highest building on campus.
- provide current information.
UC **conducts** lectures between eight am and six pm.
- describe the content of literary works like novels, plays, and films (known as the *literary present*).
Shakespeare's Hamlet famously **declares** "To be, or not to be; that is the question".
- interpret research findings in your own or previously published research.³
The results **suggest** a strong correlation between social media addiction and anxiety.
- refer to theory (since theory claims to be true in general, rather than within a specific time frame).
Marxist theory **prioritises** class analyses over discursive interpretations.
- introduce figures, tables and graphs.
Figure 1 **shows** the average concentration of nitrates in the rivers that were sampled.

Present perfect tense (*has* or *have* + past participle)

Use this tense to:

- refer to events/states of being that began in the past and continue into the present.
Most research on eating disorders **has focused** solely on women.

Past perfect tense (*had* + past participle)

Use this tense to:

- refer to events that took place prior to another event in the past to emphasise the sequence of events. When sequence is less important, either past perfect or past simple can be used.
After I **had mastered** the sonatas, I **began** to play the concertos. (sequence emphasised)
I **had eaten** before I left the house. ✓
I **ate** before I left the house. ✓

Future tense

Use this tense to:

- state the aims of future research (e.g., in a research proposal).
This research **will investigate** how outdoor recreational activities affect mental health.
- state an argument or main points (present tense is also used frequently—check with your dept.).
This essay **will argue** that National Standards failed to improve student learning.
I **will examine** three learning theories: sociocultural, cognitive and behavioural.

³ Past simple may also be appropriate, for example, when discussing others' work using APA style.

Exercise 1

Circle a., b. or c. to indicate the correct verb tense(s) for each sentence.

1. For most undergraduate degrees at UC, students ____ to pass courses worth 360 points.
 - a. need
 - b. will need
 - c. *either*
2. 20 of the 32 interviewees ____ that they felt only moderately fluent in te reo Māori.
 - a. have reported
 - b. reported
 - c. *either*
3. After approval from the Human Ethics Committee is received, participant selection ____.
 - a. will commence
 - b. commences
 - c. *either*
4. To date, no peer-reviewed research ____ the link between vaccination and autism.
 - a. has confirmed
 - b. confirmed
 - c. *either*
5. Harry Potter ____ a wizard.
 - a. was
 - b. is
 - c. *either*
6. Although cocaine ____ an ingredient in the original Coca-Cola, it was removed in 1929.
 - a. had been
 - b. was
 - c. *either*
7. Einstein ____ his theory of general relativity in 1915.
 - a. has published
 - b. published
 - c. *either*
8. This theory ____ the existence of black holes.
 - a. hypothesises
 - b. hypothesised
 - c. *either*
9. Lee (2012) ____ that social connections are as influential as diet on longevity.
 - a. argues
 - b. argued
 - c. *either*
10. Taxi fares ____ significantly since the arrival of Uber.
 - a. declined
 - b. have declined
 - c. *either*

Answers

1. a. (need). Present simple for statements of fact.
2. b. (reported). Past simple for results of research.
3. c. (will commence or commences). Future simple if describing a specific process, present simple if describing a fact, that is, something that always happens.
4. a. (has confirmed). Present perfect for things that began in the past and continue into the present.
5. b. (is). Present simple/“literary present” for fictional works.
6. c. (had been or was). Past perfect for events prior to another mentioned event in the past, but past simple is also acceptable since the sequence of events does not need to be emphasised.
7. b. (published). Past simple for an event that occurred in the past and has finished.
8. a. (hypothesises). Present simple when discussing theory.
9. c. (argues or argued). Past simple and present simple are both used. See footnote three.
10. b. (have declined). Present perfect when referring to events that began in the past and continue into the present.