

Verbs: Time Frames

We build time frames as we read by using verb forms in a sentence. Time frames help writers express when actions occur in relation to one another and help readers understand if an action is happening before or after or simultaneously with another. Consider the following example.

I pick at what's left of the popcorn and thought about the summer, the summer that was both awful and wonderful.

In this example, the narrator begins to create a present tense time frame. *I pick* grounds us immediately in the present tense. Notice, too, how the *is* implicit in *what's* confirms this time frame. We have a consistent time frame established, one that we will use to predict future actions and place them in relation to one another in our minds.

But look at what happens when we get to the next verb: *thought*. *Thought* is a past tense verb form: reading *thought* in the same line as the other present tense verbs disrupts the time frame we have established. From the present time we are shifted suddenly, and unexplainably, into the past.

This is a disruption in the time frame.

As writers we need to give readers a consistent time frame in which to predict and think about our topics and ideas. When we choose verb forms thoughtfully, we build coherent time frames for our readers.

This handout will help you understand how verb tense inconsistency disrupts time frames/sequences and how meaning changes as we change verb forms.

Building a Coherent Time Frame

The sentence from the opening paragraph is from the following excerpt, which has been altered to disrupt the original time sequence.

Model Paragraph with a Disrupted Time Sequence

- 1) I pick at what's left of the popcorn and *thought* about the summer, the summer that was both awful and wonderful. 2) I thank Adam, as I *thank* him almost every night since August, for showing me that it's possible to lift the corners of our universe. 3) Adam *tells* me about lifting the corners the second time I met him, but I had no idea what he meant. 4) Now I think I do. 5) It's all about changing what's handed to you, about poking around a little, lifting the corners, seeing what's underneath, poking that. 6) Sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't, but at least you're exploring. And life is always more interesting that way. ~Ann M. Martin, *A Corner of the Universe*

We have seen the problems created by the use of *thought* in the first sentence. To develop the present time frame, Ann M. Martin originally chose the **present-tense** form of *thought*: *think*.

I pick at what's left of the popcorn and *think* about the summer, the summer that was both awful and wonderful.

All three of the verbs before the comma are in present tense. So why is the verb *was*—a past tense verb—an effective choice in this same sentence? Why is it not also in the present form?

At this current moment, the narrator is reflecting on something that happened in the past. *Was* makes sense in relation to the present frame: *pick*, *is*, and *think* all happen in the present. *Was* tells us that the action we *think* about happened in the past.

We have the ability to reflect on past events when we are living in the present. For instance, I can say that at this moment I *think* about when I *was* little and *used* to play flashlight tag at night. *Was* and *used to play* turn our minds to the past without breaking the frame because I have established that I am reflecting on something that already occurred.

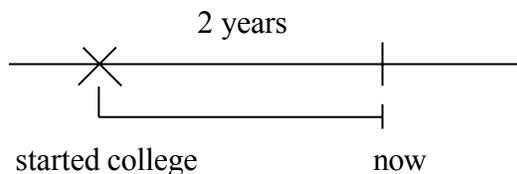
Using Tenses Consistently to Avoid Disruption

If Ann Martin had opted for strict consistency in that last example, the sentence would not have built an accurate time frame: she needed to shift to past because the action took place in the past. You can learn from this example: sometimes a writer's strict consistency in choosing verb forms does not create for the readers a consistent reading of time. Sometimes we need to signal a **sequence of actions** in time.

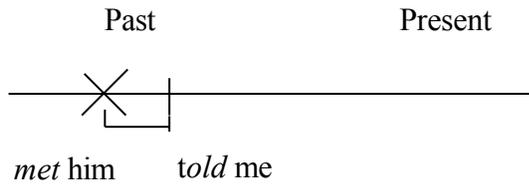
When we place the word *have* in front of a **past participle verb**, for instance, we are writing in the **present perfect tense**. The present perfect locates us in the present as we view the past: it indicates when an action first occurred and that it still continues to occur. Think about the time frame carved out in the following model.

I *have been* a college student for two years.

In this sentence, the word *have* and the past participle verb form of to be, *been*, indicate that present perfect is being used. The specific time frame of *two years* indicates when this action first began. *Have been* indicates that two years ago I began my college career as a student, and to this day, I continue to be a college student.



This time frame is grounded in the past.



The revised time frame mapped above indicates that when the narrator met Adam for the second time, Adam told her something. These actions have already occurred and are meant to remain in the past.

Here is the original passage. Notice how it demonstrates verb tense consistency and time sequence cohesion.

Model Paragraph with a Coherent Time Sequence

I pick at what's left of the popcorn and think about the summer, the summer that was both awful and wonderful. I thank Adam, as I have thanked him almost every night since August, for showing me that it's possible to lift the corners of our universe. Adam told me about lifting the corners the second time I met him, but I had no idea what he meant. Now I think I do. It's all about changing what's handed to you, about poking around a little, lifting the corners, seeing what's underneath, poking that. Sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't, but at least you're exploring. And life is always more interesting that way. ~Ann M. Martin, *A Corner of a Universe*

Activity 1

Read the following passage that contains verb tense inconsistency and time sequence disruption. Each sentence from the passage has been numbered. Fix and maintain verb tenses to create time sequence cohesion.

Disrupted Time Sequence

1) When I was in third grade, I had a pet guinea pig. 2) Her name is Willy, and she likes to play outside on the grass. 3) Willy has brown and white fur and black marble eyes. 4) She is gentle and my best friend. 5) I used to tell her my secrets, and she is listening. 6) Willy is a sweet guinea pig and always makes me feel happy.

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. When I was in third grade, I had a pet guinea pig.
(*I had* in this sentence indicates that Willy *was* my pet in the past.)
2. Her name *was* Willy, and she *liked* to play outside on the grass.

(The verbs *is* and *likes* ground us in present tense, but these verbs should be in past tense because Willy is no longer my pet based upon what we know from the first sentence. This same rule applies for the following sentences, too.)

3. Willy *had* brown and white fur and black marble eyes.
4. She *was* gentle and my best friend.
5. I used to tell her my secrets, and she *would listen*.
6. Willy *was* a sweet guinea pig and always *made* me feel happy.

Changing Meaning as We Change Verb Forms

Changing verb forms throughout an essay is not forbidden; meaning changes as we change verb forms. Consider the following example.

Last summer I went to Disneyland. I enjoyed exploring the theme park and riding Space Mountain. The Disney characters *made/make* me feel happy.

Which verb form of *to make* should you use? *Made* or *make*? Either verb form can be used in this sentence; however, you must consider how each verb form changes the meaning of the sentence.

If I say that the Disney characters *made* me feel happy, the sentence reveals that last summer, when I saw the Disney characters, they made me feel happy. My feelings for Disney characters are short term; they only made me feel happy at that moment. However, if I say that the Disney characters *make* me feel happy, the meaning of the sentence changes. Rather, I am saying that when I think of the Disney characters, they *make* me feel happy. My feelings for Disney characters are long term and continuous whenever I think of them.

Disneyland *has/had* good service.

Which verb form of *to have* should you use? *Has* or *had*? Again, either verb form can be used in this sentence. As a writer, you must consider how the meaning of a sentence can change when you use different verb forms.

If I say that Disneyland *has* good service, I am stating a universal truth about the theme park. This universal truth could be a conclusion that I've made based on many past experiences at the park. However, if I say that Disneyland *had* good service, I am reflecting on a single experience I had regarding the hospitality management at the park.

Activity 2

Read each sentence below. You will have the option to pick one of two verb forms listed. Your decision should be based on what the writer is trying to say and your understanding of how each verb form changes the meaning of the sentence.

1. A weakness of the study *is/was* the use of a black and white television.
If the writer is commenting on a weakness of the study that is true today, which verb form should he or she use?

2. Sammy *made/makes* the most delicious chocolate mousse.
If the writer is reflecting on a past experience, which verb form should he or she use?

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. Since the writer is commenting on what is true today, he or she will use *is*: *A weakness of the study is the use of a black and white television.* The implication is that this study remains weak in the present.
2. Since the writer is reflecting on a past experience, he or she will use *made*: *At the moment when I ate Sammy's chocolate mousse, I thought she made the most delicious chocolate mousse.*

References

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