

## Tense Shift

Verb tenses show time. A writer must be careful to use the tense (present, past, or future) that correctly shows the time of an event or action. Problems with tense shift occur when a writer moves from one tense to another inappropriately, combining different time frames within the same sentence, paragraph, or essay. This problem will likely confuse the reader.

Present tense shows an event or action taking place in the current moment. Past tense shows that an event or action has already occurred. Future tense shows that an event or action will take place but has not yet occurred.

A writer shows a change in time by shifting verb tense:

Education *is* a challenging field with or without computer technology (present). Education *was* untouched by computer technology until the early 1980s (past). That technology *is* advancing education with each passing year (present), and the field of education *will be* a testing ground for future technological advances (future).

The above paragraph shows an appropriate use of tense shift in a paragraph. The writer is comparing the field of education with regard to computer technology in the past, present and future.

However, when a writer uses more than one tense to refer to the same event or action, the result is confusion for the reader:

Professor Waters *uses* (present) sign language to communicate with her students. The students *responded* (past) well to this unorthodox method of teaching, and each year one or two students *become* (present) interpreters for the hard of hearing.

The tense shifts in the above paragraph leave the reader confused about when the professor used sign language. Was it in the past? Does Professor Waters use that technique today? The first sentence implies that the professor uses the technique every year, but the first verb in the second sentence implies that it was something she did in the past, while the third sentence goes back to implying it is currently in use. To correct this paragraph, the writer will need to change the second verb to the present tense (*respond*) to stay consistent.