

Eschew Obfuscation: Things Are Getting Tense by Faye Roberts

The Present, the Future, and the Past walked into a bar. It was tense. (A little grammar humor—and one of my favorites.)

Verb tenses can certainly create tension when a writer struggles to get them right. Each verb tense has a specific function; it is used to refer to action occurring at a specific time. An incorrect tense can make it harder to follow the action and can leave the reader confused.

This column provides a brief introduction to the six tenses. As Wariner (*English Grammar and Composition*) explains, “verbs change in form to show the time of their action or of the idea they express. The time expressed by a verb (present, past, future) is its tense.”

Present tense

The present tense describes action occurring now.

I *walk*.

He *pays*.

You *earn*.

They *deliver*.

Future tenses

Two tenses—the **Future** and the **Future Perfect**—relate to action in the future. The **future tense** describes action that has not happened yet but will occur in the future; it often uses *will* or *shall* but it may be formed in other ways.

I *will walk* tomorrow.

He *shall pay* his debts.

You *will earn* a better salary.

They *are going to deliver* the pizzas.

The **future perfect tense** describes action that will be completed in the future *before* some other future action or event. The future perfect uses *will have* or *shall have* + the past participle of the verb. (Past participles of regular verbs are formed by adding *d* or *-ed*.)

By the end of the week I *will have walked* ten miles.

In a single month David *will have paid* more for parking than for lunches.



Photo by Wyron A.

It's in dealing with the past that things get interesting. Three tenses—the Past, the Present Perfect, and the Past Perfect—all deal with action that happened in the past. The subtle differences can be tricky.

If you continue saving at the same rate, you *will have earned* enough for the down payment by next year.

The drivers *will have delivered* all the orders by 6 p.m.

Past tenses

It's in dealing with the past that things get interesting. Three tenses—the **Past**, the **Present Perfect**, and the **Past Perfect**—all deal with action that happened in the past. The subtle differences can be tricky.

Past tense – describes action that occurred in the past but is no longer occurring now.

I *walked*. I *was walking*.

He *paid*. He *was paying*.

You *earned*. You *were earning*.

They *delivered*. They *were delivering*.

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Faye Roberts (www.FayeRobertsEdits.com) is an independent copyeditor and proofreader of fiction and nonfiction. A former librarian, she lives in the north Florida and metro Atlanta areas. Faye is a member of the Editorial Freelancers Association, ACES: The Society for Editing, and Sisters in Crime.

Eschew Obfuscation, continued

The past tense can also be used for the subjunctive mood. In English, the subjunctive is a statement of something that has not yet occurred and may never occur.

If I *walked* faster, I would get there sooner. (I'm not walking faster now.)

He demanded that his invoice bill *be paid* immediately. (The invoice hasn't been paid yet.)

Present Perfect tense – describes action that happened in the past, but not at a definite time in the past. It can also be used to describe something that both occurred in the past and is also continuing into the present. The present perfect uses *have* or *has* + the verb.

I *have been walking* on the treadmill for an hour. (The speaker may or may not still be walking.)

He *has paid* for his mistakes. (He may or may not still be paying for them.)

You *have earned* a reward. (When the reward was earned isn't specified.)

They *have delivered* seven pizzas so far. (They are still out delivering pizzas.)

Past Perfect tense – describes action that was completed in the past and that occurred before some other action or event. The past perfect uses *had* + the verb.

After I *had walked* the dog, I changed my shoes. (Walking the dog occurred before shoes were changed.)

When he *had paid* for lunch, he left the restaurant. (Paying took place before leaving the restaurant.)

Once you *had earned* enough to buy a car, you stopped saving your money. (After the price of a car was earned, saving money was discontinued.)

They *had delivered* the largest orders before rush hour began. (The largest orders were delivered; then rush hour began.)

Editors of fiction report spotting particular problems in describing actions that happened in the past. Of the six tenses, two culprits—the past and the past perfect—seem most likely to trip up writers. Here's an example to illustrate the difference.

Past tense. Chris studied graphic design last summer. (Meaning: Chris studied graphic design last summer but is not studying it now.)

Past Perfect tense. Chris has been studying graph-

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Warriner's English Grammar and Composition by John E. Warriner

ic design since last summer. (Meaning: Chris began studying graphic design last summer and is continuing to study it now.)

Using tenses consistently

The choice of tense can make a big difference in the dramatic impact of a passage but it's important to use tenses consistently. Random switches are unsettling for the reader as the paragraphs below illustrate.

Mixed tenses: Do you ever find yourself home alone, watching a scary movie on TV? The movie ends but your heart still raced from the terrifying climax. The house is so quiet that any small sound was noticeable. You wondered if the back door is locked.

What is that creak? You looked around for a weapon and seize the fireplace poker. Crash! A sudden noise came from the kitchen! You tiptoe down the hall and peeked around the corner. The cat looked up at you from the dish he has knocked off the counter.

In contrast, here are two revisions with more consistent verbs, one version using present tense and the other using past tense.

Present tense: Do you ever find yourself home alone, watching a scary movie on TV? The movie ends but your heart still races from the terrifying climax. The house is so quiet that any small sound is noticeable. You wonder if the back door is locked. What is that creak? You look around for a weapon and seize the fireplace poker. Crash! A sudden noise comes from the kitchen! You tiptoe down the hall and peek around the corner. The cat looks up at you from the dish he has knocked off the counter.

Past tense: Did you ever find yourself home alone, watching a scary movie on TV? The movie ended but your heart still raced from the terrifying climax. The house was so quiet that any small sound was noticeable. You wondered if the back door was locked. What was that creak? You looked around for a weapon and seized the fireplace poker. Crash! A sudden noise came from the kitchen! You tiptoed down the hall and peeked around the corner. The cat looked up at you from the dish he had knocked off the counter.

Still feeling tense? Maybe walking into a bar will help.

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