Choosing a Verb Tense

The Present Tense

Add –s to make the third person singular present tense. Since most academic, scientific, and technical writing is done in present tense, this is a very important reminder!

> *The system permit**s***
> *Each operator control**s***

Use the present tense

--to show present states or conditions:

> *The test program **is** ready.*
> *The bell sound**s** shrill.*

--to show natural laws or eternal truths:

> *The earth **rotates** around the sun.*
> *Carbon and oxygen **combine** to form carbon dioxide.*

--to show habitual actions and repeated acts:

> *We **hold** a staff meeting every Tuesday.*
> *The new file **boots** the computer.*

--to quote from or paraphrase published work:

> *Nagamichi **claims** that calcium inhibits the reaction.*
> *MCI's brochure **reads** "We are more efficient than AT&T."*

--to define or explain procedures or terminology:

> *The board **fits** in the lower right-hand slot.*
> *BOC **stands for** "British Oxygen Corporation."*

--to show possible futures in time and conditional clauses:

> *Your supervisor will recommend you for promotion if she **likes** your work.*
> *The minutes of the meeting will be circulated once I **type** them.*

The Past Tense

Add the proper suffix (usually –ed) or infix to the verb stem to make the past tense. Consult a dictionary if you have questions about the correct past form.

Use the past tense

--for events that happened at a specific time in the past:

> *The fax **arrived** at 4:59 PM.*
> *Kennedy **died** in 1963.*

--for repeated or habitual items which no longer happen:

> *We **used** to have our department meetings on Tuesday.*
> *He **smoked** cigarettes constantly until his coronary.*

--after "if" or "unless" to writer about events that are not true or are not likely to happen (use "would" in the main clause):

> *If we **failed** to test the system, we would be liable for damages.*
> *Unless he **submitted** the paperwork yesterday, we would never be able to enforce the patent.*

The Present Perfect Tense

Make the present perfect tense by combining the helping verb "have" with the past participle form of the verb. Check your dictionary if you have trouble identifying this form.

Use the present perfect tense
- --to show an action that began in the past and is still going on:
  - *Genentech has been in business for a decade.*
  - *The fax machine has changed the way businesses work.*
- --to show an action that began in the past and was finished at an indefinite time but is closely related to the present or future:
  - *I have just returned from vacation.*
  - *SONY has recently announced three new products.*

The Future Tense

Make the future tense by using "shall" (first person) or "will" (second or third person) and the verb. (Most Americans use "will" with all persons.)

Use the future tense
- --for newly-made decisions:
  - *They will explore our options.*
- --for orders:
  - *You will have the report on my desk by 2:00.*

Alternative Future Tense Constructions

- --<u>Be + going to.</u> Use this construction in conversation and in less formal writing:
  - *Andy is going to order new switches for the relays.*

- --<u>Be + to + verb.</u> Use this form to show regulations or obligations:
  - *Wiring is to meet local codes and state standards.*
  - *We are to greet the visitors at the airport tomorrow.*

- --<u>Present tense.</u> Use this construction to show future events that are <u>certain to happen</u> after <u>if, unless, whether,</u> and <u>some adverbs showing time.</u>
  - *Christmas falls on a Tuesday this year.*
  - *My plane leaves at 5:10 P.M.*
  - *When you finish filling out the form, you may leave.*

- --<u>Present Progressive Tense.</u> Use this construction for actions or events in the near future.
  - *We are having lunch on Thursday.*
  - *The inspectors are coming after Labor Day.*

<u>The Present Progressive Tense</u>
Make the present progressive tense by combining the present tense of <u>be</u> and the <u>-ing</u> form of the verb.

Use the present progressive tense
      --to show action in progress now but soon to end:
            The computer program <u>is running</u> as we speak.
            We <u>are designing</u> tests that will simulate the airplane crash.
      --to show action that is in progress:
            It <u>is raining</u>.