

Writing About Your Research: Verb Tense

The following guidelines may help you figure out when to use past and present tense.

USE PAST TENSE . . .

- **To describe your methodology and report your results.** At the time you write your report, thesis, dissertation or article, you have completed your study, so should use *past tense* in your methodology section to record what you did, and in your results section to report what you found:
 - “We hypothesized that adults would remember more items than children.”
 - “We extracted tannins from the leaves by bringing them to a boil in 50% methanol.”
- **When referring to the work of previous researchers.** When citing previous research, use past tense. Whatever a previous researcher said, did or wrote happened in the past. Results relevant only in the past, or to a particular study and not yet generally accepted should also be expressed in past tense:
 - “Smith (2008) reported that adult respondents remembered 30 percent more than children. “ (Smith’s study was completed in the past & his finding was specific to that particular study.)
 - “Previous research showed that children confuse the source of their memories more often than adults.” (Research conducted in the past, but finding now widely accepted.)
- **To describe a fact, law or finding that is no longer considered valid and relevant.**
 - “Nineteenth-century physicians held that women got migraines because they were “the weaker sex,” but current research shows that the causes of migraine are unrelated to gender. “ (Note shift here from past tense [discredited belief] to present [current belief].)

USE PRESENT TENSE . . .

- **To express findings that continue to be true.** Use present tense to express truths or facts supported by research results that won’t change:
 - “Genetic information is encoded in the sequence of nucleotides on DNA.”
 - “Galileo asserted that the earth revolves the sun.” (The asserting took place in the past, but the earth is still revolving around the sun.)
 - “We chose Vietnam for this study because it has a long coastline.” (Use past tense to indicate what you did [chose Vietnam], but present tense to indicate the length of Vietnam’s coastline is unlikely to change.)
- **To refer to the article, thesis or dissertation itself.** Use the present tense in reference to the thesis or dissertation itself and what it contains, shows, etc. For example:
 - “In Table 3, I show that the main cause of weight increase was nutritional value of the feed.” (Table 3 will always show this; and will be true whenever anyone reads this sentence.)
- **To discuss your findings and present your conclusions. Also use present tense to discuss your results and their implications.**
 - “Weight increased as the nutritional value of feed increased. These results suggest that feeds higher in nutritional value contribute to greater weight gain in livestock.” (Use past tense to indicate what you found [weight increased], but present tense to suggest what result implies.)

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