

## Verb Tense

The three basic time frames in the English verb system are **past**, **present**, and **future**. The three verb tense families in English are the **simple**, **perfect**, and **continuous** (or progressive). Notice how these time frames and tense families combine.

Past	Present	Future
<p>I <b>paint</b>ed. (past simple)</p> <p>I <b>was paint</b>ing. (past continuous)</p>	<p>I <b>paint</b>. (present simple)</p> <p>I <b>am paint</b>ing. (present continuous)</p>	<p>I <b>will paint</b>. (future simple)</p> <p>I <b>will be paint</b>ing. (future continuous)</p>
<p>I <b>had wait</b>ed. (past perfect)</p> <p>I <b>had been wait</b>ing. (past perfect continuous)</p>	<p>I <b>have paint</b>ed. (present perfect)</p> <p>I <b>have been paint</b>ing. (present perfect continuous)</p>	<p>I <b>will have paint</b>ed. (future perfect)</p> <p>I <b>will have been paint</b>ing. (future perfect continuous)</p>

### Tense Consistency and Shifts

Do not shift from one tense to another if the time frame for each action or state is the same. To keep verb tense consistent, first establish a main verb tense for your writing. Generally, use either the simple past or simple present.

At 8 PM the curtain **opened**, the artist **walked** on stage, and the performance **began**.  
(NOT . . . *the curtain opened, the artist walked on stage, and the performance **begin**.*)

Do shift tense to show when one action is happening (or happened) relative to another.

The printmakers **love** their new monotype press, which they **bought** themselves.  
(NOT The printmakers love their new monotype press, which they buy themselves.)

*Love* is present tense, referring to a current state (they still love it now); *bought* is past, referring to an action completed before the current time frame (they are not buying it any longer).

### Present Tense for Literature and Art

Use present tenses to describe action in a literary work, movie, or other fictional narrative, as well as for works of art, which are considered to exist in the present time even though they were created in the past.

In Chagall's painting *Birthday* (1915), a couple **stands** in front of an open window and **kisses**. Where the scene **departs** from the ordinary, however, is that the man **is floating** above the woman.