

Tense in Academic Writing

GRS Writing Group – WED 22 MAR

It is impossible, of course, for any source of support to be universally applicable; a necessary part of using a broad range of resources is developing the ability to distinguish between advice that is appropriate for your circumstance and advice that would be better suited for someone else.

- Rachael Cayley, Explorations in Style, Using Resources for Academic Writing



When do you find tense confusing?

Have you ever been told “Write everything in past tense” or “Write everything in present tense”.

Verb tense simplification (not applied universally across disciplines)

(1) Aims are quite variable – check some journal articles in your discipline

(2) Methods

Your methods - what you did = PAST TENSE

Other researcher’s methods - what someone else did = PAST TENSE

(3) Results

Your results - what you found = PAST TENSE

Other researcher’s results - what someone else found = PAST TENSE

[Exceptions – tables and figures –as there for reader to see - PRESENT TENSE]

(4) Conclusions

Your conclusions - what you conclude from your research / what you think now = PRESENT TENSE

Other researcher’s conclusions – what they concluded from their research = PAST OR PRESENT TENSE. PRESENT TENSE if thinking is still current. PAST TENSE if thinking has changed.

(5) Future research recommendations – what you suggest should be done in the future = FUTURE TENSE



Some useful resources

- University of Melbourne [Using Tenses in Scientific Writing](#)
- University of Adelaide [Tenses in Academic Writing](#)
- [Academic Writing Phrasebank](#)



If you have some spare time you may want to further explore:

- Thesis Whisperer [The Tense Debate](#)
- Doctoral Writing SIG [Different types of time: Making sense of verb tenses in research writing](#)
- Harvard Writing Project [Disciplinary Writing Guides](#) (not so useful for the sciences / applied sciences)

Further details of the UWA GRS Writing Group are available here, including advice sheets to download:

<http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/students/resources/communities#writinggroup>