



GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

Using a Two-Tense Verb System

One of the major challenges encountered in academic writing for both native and non-native speakers of English is being able to master the complexities of the verb system. Having the ability to demonstrate an awareness of the proper use and application of verb forms and tenses is therefore a critical element in becoming a successful academic writer. Incorporating regular and irregular verbs, the verb system can be confusing and difficult to negotiate. Consequently, in order to have a better understanding of the verb system, it is helpful to simplify verb usage to a basic formula.

All verbs with the exception of “be” have five forms, which in turn create tenses: the base form, the “-s” form, the “-ing” form, the past tense, and the past participle. In Standard English there are three main verb tenses: past, present, and future; in addition, there are simple, perfect, and progressive forms for each of the three main verb tenses. However, most linguists agree that English can be more easily approached as a two-tense verb system, present and past. Looking at the verb system this way is both simpler and more suitable to the actual structure of the language.

FORMING THE TWO-TENSE VERB SYSTEM

Standard English is structured around a time frame of either “**then**” (the past), referring to actions that are completed, or “**now**” (the present), referring to actions that are not completed. All other verbs, including simple, perfect, and progressive forms are expressed in relationship to one of these two time frames; they refer to “**before**,” “**during**,” and “**after**” the main time frame, and they all contain either a present tense or a past tense form.

Tenses indicate the time of an action in relation to the time of referring to the action either in speech or in writing. The two-tense verb system is formed by the simple, perfect, and progressive forms for the present and past tenses as presented below:

- The **simple present** tense is the base form or “-s” form of the verb; the **simple past** is the base form plus “-ed/-d” or the irregular verb form.
- The **present perfect** tense is formed with “has, have” plus the past participle; the **past perfect** is formed with “had” plus the past participle.
- The **present progressive** is formed with “am, is, are” plus the present participle; the **past progressive** is formed with “was, were” plus the present participle.
- The **present perfect progressive** is formed by “has, have” plus “been” plus the present participle; the **past perfect progressive** is formed with “had” plus “been” plus the present participle.

USING PRESENT AND PAST TENSES

The following examples illustrate aspects of active voice verbs referring to present and past time.

	Present	Past
Simple	I eat . S/he eats .	I ate . S/he ate .
Perfect	She has eaten before today.	She had eaten before yesterday.
Progressive	They are eating now.	They were eating then.
Perfect progressive	He says he has been eating.	He said he had been eating.

The chart below presents the two-tense verb system of English, illustrating the division between past and present and the relationships to the main time frame of each verb form. Note the form of the main verb for each time frame in italics.

Present Tense

Before (perfect) have/has + -ed/-en have eaten/has eaten	Main base/base + -s eat/eats	After (future) will + base will eat	During (progressive) am/is/are + -ing am/is/are eating
or			
do/does + base do eat/does eat			

Past Tense

Before (perfect) had + -ed/-en had eaten	Main -ed (or irregular) ate	After (future) would + base would eat	During (progressive) was/were + -ing was/were eating
or			
did + base did eat			