The verb system poses a significant challenge for both native and nonnative speakers of English, and using the appropriate verb form and tense is an important element in becoming an effective academic writer. Tense is the form of a verb that indicates time and can be classified as present, past, and future. In addition, each tense has simple, perfect, progressive, and perfect progressive verb forms to indicate the time span of the actions taking place. For each time frame (present, past, and future), auxiliary or helping verbs are used with the base verb to convey completed actions (perfect forms), actions in progress (progressive forms), and actions that are completed by some specified time or event and emphasize the length of time in progress (perfect progressive forms).

With the exception of the verb “be,” all verbs in Standard English have five main forms:

- the base or the form listed in a dictionary
- the “-s” form or the third person singular form of the present tense
- the past tense, which functions as a complete verb without the use of auxiliary verbs
- the “-ing” form or the present participle, used with a form of the verb “be” to form the progressive tenses
- the past participle, often called the “-ed/en” form, used with “have,” “has,” or “had” to form the perfect tenses

SIMPLE TENSES

The simple tenses indicate relatively simple time relations: the simple present, the simple past, and the simple future.

Simple Present

The simple present tense is used primarily for actions occurring at the moment, regularly, or at a set time in the future. It is formed by using the base verb or the base verb with “-s” or “-es” and can be singular (I listen, you listen, s/he/it listens) or plural (we listen, you listen, they listen). When the verb is irregular, be sure to use the proper form of the verb; for example, with the irregular verb “be,” use the following: singular (I am, you are, s/he/it is); plural (we, you, they are).

I listen to music whenever I have the opportunity.
Is it true that you listen to music for two hours each night?
My sister told me that she listens to music for relaxation.

I am too old to make what has become a difficult journey.
She is ready for the next question.
We are going in the wrong direction to the airport.

**Simple Past**

The simple past tense is used for actions completed in the past. With regular verbs, it is formed by using the base verb with “-ed” and can be singular (I lived, you lived, s/he/it lived) or plural (we lived, you lived, they lived). With irregular verbs, the base verb is not formed with “-ed,” for example, the simple past tense for the base verb “buy” would be “bought”: singular (I, you, s/he/it bought); plural (we, you, they bought).

I lived in San Juan before I moved to New York.
He walked to the concert instead of taking the train.
They bought a new table at the furniture store.

**Simple Future**

The simple future tense is used for actions that will occur in the future. It is formed by using “will” and the base verb (I, you s/he/it, we, they will complete).

I will complete my undergraduate degree next semester.
Do you know when he will return to the office?
They will return to the same nesting place each winter.

**PERFECT TENSES**

The perfect tenses express an action that was or will be completed at the time of another action and are formed with “have,” “has,” or “had” plus the past participle (“-ed/en”) of the base verb: the present perfect, the past perfect, and the future perfect.

**Present Perfect**

The present perfect tense is used to indicate that an action occurring at some unstated time in the past is related or continues to the present time. It is formed by using “have” or “has” plus the past participle of the base verb (I, you, we, they have lived; s/he/it has lived).

I have lived in this apartment since I graduated from college.
My neighbor has registered to vote in the next election.
They have gone to the deli across the street to get lunch.

**Past Perfect**

The past perfect tense is used when one past event was completed before another past event or stated past time. It is formed by using “had” plus the past participle of the base verb (I, you, s/he/it, we, they had forgotten).

Dr. Murray and Anna C. Rockowitz Writing Center, Hunter College, City University of New York
Someone had forgotten to lock the door.
He had arrived before we got there.
After the guests had gone, I went to bed.

Future Perfect

The future perfect tense is used to indicate an action that will be completed before another time or event in the future. It is formed by using “will” plus “have” and the past participle of the base verb.

By the time I see you, I will have graduated.
She will have completed the assignment earlier than expected.
When they finally arrive, they will have travelled for more than ten hours.

PROGRESSIVE TENSES

The progressive tenses take a form of the verb “be” (am, are, is, was, were) plus the present participle of the base verb: the present progressive, the past progressive, and the future progressive.

Present Progressive

The present progressive tense is used to indicate an action in progress at the moment of speaking. It is formed by using “am,” “are,” or “is” with the present participle of the base verb (I am, you are, s/he/it is, we, they are).

Juanita is sleeping in the next room.
I need an umbrella because it is raining.
Both of the instructors are planning to meet with the student.

Past Progressive

The past progressive tense is used for an activity that was in progress over time or at a specified point in the past. It is formed by using “was,” or “were” with the present participle of the base verb.

I was walking down the street when it began to rain.
During the intermission, she was talking to her friend from school.
Last year at this time, they were preparing to volunteer at the conference.

Future Progressive

The future progressive tense is used for an activity that is expected to be in progress at a time in the future when something else will happen. It is formed by using “will” plus “be” or a form of
the verb “be” with the present participle of the base verb (I, you s/he/it, we, they will be studying).

I will be studying until the beginning of class.
At this same time tomorrow, I will be waiting for you in the lobby.
I am going to be sending you my resume.

PERFECT PROGRESSIVE TENSES

The perfect progressive tenses take “have” plus a form of “be” plus the verb and indicate an action that takes place over a specific period of time: the present perfect progressive, the past perfect progressive, and the future perfect progressive.

Present Perfect Progressive

The present perfect progressive tense describes actions that start in the past and continue to the present. It is formed by using “have” or “has” plus “been” plus the present participle of the base verb (I, you, we, they have been sitting, s/he/it has been sitting).

I have been sitting at my desk all morning.
You have been studying for five hours.
Since she came home from school, she has been watching television.

Past Perfect Progressive

The past perfect progressive tense is used to indicate actions that ended or will end at a specified time or before another action. It is formed by using “had” plus “been” plus the present participle of the base verb (I, you, s/he/it, we, they had been looking).

I had been looking for the recipe since early this morning.
It had been sitting on the shelf for many, many years.
They had been waiting for a visit from their grandchildren.

Future Perfect Progressive

The future perfect progressive tense is used to indicate actions that ended or will end at a specified time or before another action. It is formed by using “will” plus “have” plus “been” plus the present participle of the base verb (I, you, s/he/it, we, they will have been teaching), for example, “When Professor Jones retires next month, he will have been teaching for 45 years.”