

CONSISTENCY OF TENSE

Verb tense

Verb tense indicates the time of action, indicating whether the action occurred in the past, whether it occurs in the present, or whether it will happen in the future.

Consistency of tense

Consistency of tense means using the same tense throughout your paper, unless it is necessary to show an event that occurred at a different time.

- **Do not shift tenses unnecessarily.**
- **If you begin writing a paper in the present tense, don't shift suddenly to the past.**
- **If you begin in the past, don't shift without reason to the present.**

Notice the inconsistent verb tenses in the following selection:

Smoke **spilled** from the front of the overheated car. The driver **opens** up the hood, then **jumped** back as steam billows out.

The verbs must be consistently in the present tense:

Smoke **spills** from the front of the overheated car. The driver **opens** up the hood, then **jumps** back as steam billows out.

Or the verbs must be consistently in the past tense:

Smoke spilled from the front of the overheated car. The driver opened up the hood, then jumped back as steam billowed out.

Of course, you should use different verb tenses in a sentence or paragraph if they convey the meaning that you wish to convey:

Last fall I **took** English 512; now I **am taking** English 513. (The verbs in this sentence accurately show the time relationship between the two classroom experiences.)