**Tenses**

Any statements of **general fact** should be written using the **present tense**.

Any discussion about **prior research** should be explained using the **past tense**.

If the **subject of your sentence is your study or the article** **you are writing** (e.g. “Our study demonstrates…,” or “Here, we show…”), then you should use the **present tense**.

If you are stating a **conclusion or**an**interpretation**, use the **present tense**.

If the subject of your sentence is an **actual result or observation** (e.g. “Mice in Group B developed…”), you would use the **past tense**.

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| **Abstract**  Past  To talk about actual results.  Present  To talk about general facts, the paper itself or analysis of findings | **Introduction**  Present  To talk about general background information  Present Perfect  To talk about previous research. | | **Methods**  Past  To talk about what you did  (passive is common)  Present  To explain diagrams/figures  (Ex.: “Table 1 shows…) |
| PAST  To talk about events that have been completed  (Ex.: “We found that…”, “Protocol X was followed.”  PRESENT PERFECT  To talk about events that started in past but are still ongoing or recently completed.  (Ex.: “Many experiments have focused on…”) | | PRESENT  To talk about events that are general fact, discuss current meanings, and suggest future applications.  Ex.: Insulin and glucagon regulate blood glucose levels.  Ex.: Increased hormone production indicates… | |
| **Results**  Past  To talk about actual results.  Present  To explain diagrams/figures  Ex.: “Table 1 shows…” | **Discussion**  Present  To interpret and talk about significance of findings.  Past  To briefly summarize findings. | | **Conclusion**  Past  To refer to your completed research.  Present  To talk about implications and suggest future research. |

VERBS

Much of the strength of a clause comes from its verb.

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| ***Instead of*** | ***Write*** |
| Make an examination of . . . | examine |
| Present a comparison of . . . | compare |
| Be in agreement . . . | agree |
| Perform an analysis of . . . | analyze |
| Produce an improvement in . . . | improve |

The desire **to be objective** in scientific writing has led to an **overuse of the passive voice**, often accompanied by the exclusion of agents:

"The temperature was measured" (with the verb at the end of the sentence).

Admittedly, the agent is often irrelevant: No matter who measured the temperature, we would expect its value to be the same. However, a systematic preference for the passive voice is **by no means optimal**, for at least two reasons.

**For one**, sentences written in the passive voice are often **less interesting or more difficult to read** than those written in the active voice.

Instead of a person, you could uses a non-person For example, the rather uninteresting sentence

"The temperature was measured . . . " may be replaced by the more interesting

"The measured temperature of 253°C suggests a secondary reaction in . . . ."

In the second sentence, the subject is still *temperature* (so the focus remains the same), but the verb*suggests* is in the active voice.

Similarly, the hard-to-read sentence

"In this section, a discussion of the influence of the recirculating-water temperature on the conversion rate of . . . is presented" (long subject, verb at the end) can be turned into

"This section discusses the influence of . . . . "

The subject is now *section*, which is what this sentence is really about, yet the focus on the discussion has been maintained through the active-voice verb *discusses*.

**As a second argument against** a systematic preference for the passive voice, **readers sometimes need people to be mentioned**. A sentence such as

"The temperature is believed to be the cause for . . . " is ambiguous. Readers will want to know *who* believes this — the authors of the paper, or the scientific community as a whole? To clarify the sentence, use the active voice and set the appropriate people as the subject, in either the third or the first person, as in the examples below.

Biologists believe the temperature to be . . .  
Keustermans et al. (1997) believe the temperature to be . . .  
The authors believe the temperature to be . . .  
We believe the temperature to be . .