

Tense Consistency Exercises

A. Recognizing Shifts in Sentences

Check the following sentences for confusing shifts in tense. If the tense of each underlined verb expresses the time relationship accurately, write S (satisfactory). If a shift in tense is not appropriate, write U (unsatisfactory) and make necessary changes. In most cases with an inappropriate shift, there is more than one way to correct the inconsistency. Reading the sentences aloud will help you recognize differences in time.

- ___ 1. If the club limited its membership, it will have to raise its dues.
- ___ 2. While Barbara puts in her contact lenses, the telephone rang.
- ___ 3. Thousands of people will see the art exhibit by the time it closes.
- ___ 4. By the time negotiations began, many pessimists have expressed doubt about them.
- ___ 5. After Capt. James Cook visited Alaska on his third voyage, he is killed by Hawaiian islanders in 1779.
- ___ 6. I was terribly disappointed with my grade because I studied very hard.
- ___ 7. The moderator asks for questions as soon as the speaker has finished.
- ___ 8. Everyone hopes the plan would work.
- ___ 9. Harry wants to show his friends the photos he took last summer.
- ___ 10. Scientists predict that the sun will die in the distant future.
- ___ 11. The boy insisted that he has paid for the candy bars.
- ___ 12. The doctor suggested bed rest for the patient, who suffers from a bad cold.

B. Completing Sentences

Complete these sentences, using the tense suggested.

1. We stand patiently, hoping that _____. (use future tense)
2. Advertisers seem to believe that _____. (use present tense)
3. By the time the fog lifted, _____. (use past perfect tense)
4. We will leave for Florida as soon as _____. (use present tense)
5. One student keeps repeating what _____. (use present perfect tense)
6. Yesterday our track team competed in a meet that _____. (use past tense)
7. Before the crew paves a driveway, they always _____. (use present tense [habitual action])
8. Before the crew paves the driveway, they _____. (use future tense [one-time action])
9. By the time the letter arrives, _____. (use future perfect tense)
10. When the final report is published, _____. (use future tense)

C. Completing Paragraphs

In the following passage from Alex Haley's *Roots*, some of the verbs have been deliberately omitted. Supply the appropriate tense for each missing verb, the plain form of which is given in parentheses.

In Banjul, the capital of Gambia, I met with a group of Gambians. They (tell) me how for centuries the history of Africa has been preserved. In the older villages of the back country, there are old men called griots, who (be) in effect living archives. Such men (memorize) and, on special occasions, (recite) the cumulative histories of clans or families or villages as those histories (have) long been told. Since my forefather (have) said his name was Kin-tay (properly spelled Kinte), and since the Kinte clan (be) known in Gambia, the group of Gambians would see what they could do to help me. I was back in New York when a registered letter (arrive) from Gambia.

Word (have) been passed in the back country, and a griot of the Kinte clan (have), indeed, been found. His name, the letter said, (be) Kebba Kanga Fofana. I (return) to Gambia and (organize) a safari to locate him.

D. Controlling Shifts in Paragraphs

Although the main tense in the following paragraph is past, the writer correctly shifts to present tense twice. Find these two verbs in present tense. If you encounter difficulty, try reading the paragraph aloud.

The Iroquois Indians of the Northeast regularly burned land to increase open space for agriculture. In fact, the early settlers of Boston found so few trees that they had to row out to the islands in the harbor to obtain fuel. Just how far north this practice extended is uncertain, but the Saco River in southern Maine appears to have been the original northern boundary of the agricultural clearings. Then, pressured by European settlement, the Iroquois extended their systematic burning far northward, even into the Maritime Provinces of Canada. (abridged from Hay and Farb, The Atlantic Shore)

Read the following paragraph through, and determine the main tense. Then reread it and circle the three verbs that shift incorrectly from the main tense.

For the past seven years, I have called myself a swimmer. Swimming, my one sport, provides a necessary outlet for my abundant energy. I have always drawn satisfaction from exertion, straining my muscles to their limits. I don't know why pushing forward in the water, as my muscles cried out in pain, sets off a booming cheer in my head. Many times when I rounded the turn for the last lap of a race, my complaining muscles want to downshift and idle to the finish. My mind, however, presses the pedal to the floor and yells, "FASTER!" The moment that I touched the wall my muscles relax; the pain subsides. I am pleased to have passed the point of conflict. (adapted from Brendon MacLean, "Harder!")

You will notice several shifts in tense in the following paragraph describing action in a fictional narrative. Find the six faulty shifts in tense.

In "The Use of Force" William Carlos Williams describes a struggle involving a doctor, two parents, and their young daughter. The doctor must obtain a throat culture from the girl, who was suspected of having diphtheria. This ordinarily simple task is hindered by the frightened and uncooperative patient, Mathilda Olson. Adding to the doctor's difficulties were the parents, who had to struggle with their own conflicting emotions. They want their daughter helped, but they did not trust the doctor to do the right thing. Sensitive to the parents' uncertainty, the doctor became more and more frustrated by Mathilda's resistance. Williams gives considerable attention to how each of the Olsons react, but it is clear that his main interest was in the doctor and his responses. (adapted from a student essay).