

# The Writing Lab

## Verb Tenses

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

### What Are Subjects and Verbs?

Think of a sentence like a movie. The *subject* is the “star” of your sentence, the person or thing around which all action revolves. A **verb**, on the other hand, is the action taking place. You can actually visualize this action in your mind. Here’s an example: In the movie *Die Hard*, the actor *Bruce Willis* **crawls** through a lot of filthy air shafts.

- *Bruce Willis* is the “star” doing the action, so *Bruce Willis* is the subject of this sentence.
- **Crawls** is the action being performed. This means that **crawls** is the verb of the sentence.

Sometimes, however, there really isn’t a specific action or activity going on that you can visualize in your mind other than the subject just existing in a certain form. Here are a few examples:

- *Roses* **are** red; *violets* **are** blue.
- The *pillowcase* **had** pictures of Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles all over on it.
- My *brother* **is** the owner of a 100-acre farm called “Belly Acres.”

### What Are Verb Tenses?

A verb tense is a form of the verb that indicates when the action took place *in time*. Did the action already happen? Is the action happening right now? Will the action happen in the future? The form of the verb you choose is actually determined by looking at three factors:

1. Is your subject plural (meaning more than one) or singular (meaning one)?
  2. Is the action a continuous and on-going activity or is the action a one-time event?
  3. When did the action take place?
- **Past Tense** – events have already happened
  - **Present Tense** – events are happening right now
  - **Future Tense** – events will happen sometime after the reader has read the sentence

Look at how the form of the verb changes based on these three factors:

Ginny **ran** 10 miles. (singular subject, one-time event, already happened)

Ginny and Jack **ran** 10 miles. (plural subject, one-time event, already happened)

Ginny **runs** 10 miles every day. (singular subject, continuous on-going activity, happens regularly)

Ginny and Jack **run** 10 miles every day. (plural subject, continuous on-going activity, happens regularly)

Ginny **is running** 10 miles. (singular subject, one-time activity, happening right now)

Ginny and Jack **are running** 10 miles. (plural subject, one-time activity, happening right now)

Ginny **was running** 10 miles. (singular subject, one-time activity, has happened already)

Ginny and Jack **were running** 10 miles. (plural subject, one-time activity, has happened already)

Ginny **will run** 10 miles. (singular subject, one-time activity, will happen in the future)

Ginny and Jack **will run** 10 miles. (plural subject, one-time activity will happen in the future)

## What Is a Verb Tense Agreement Error?

A verb tense agreement error occurs when you blend past, present, and future forms of verbs together in a single sentence. Here is an example: **Last Saturday**, I calleded up my cousin Keith and **compliment** him on his band's new CD.

- The words "Last Saturday" make it pretty clear the event discussed happened in the past. The verb "calleded" also makes the past tense clear because of the **-ed** ending. However, the verb "**compliment**" is present tense.
- To make the sentence consistent, it needs to be all in past OR present tense. Sometimes, you have a choice which tense you want. However, in this example, the sentence needs to be written in past tense to make sense: **Last Saturday**, I calleded up my cousin Keith and complimented him on his band's new CD.

Here is another example: I **bought** lots of Halloween candy, and I **be** the hit of the neighborhood.

- Past tense: I **bought** lots of Halloween candy, and I **was** the hit of the neighborhood.
- Present tense: I **am buying** lots of Halloween candy, and I **am** the hit of the neighborhood.
- Future tense: I **will buy** lots of Halloween candy, and I **will be** the hit of the neighborhood.

## What are Irregular Verbs?

Some verbs indicate their past tense status because they have **-ed** on the end of them. However, some words become very different words entirely:

Past	Present	Future
I <b>bought</b> lots of Halloween candy.	I <b>am buying</b> lot of Halloween candy.	I <b>will buy</b> lots of Halloween candy
I <b>was</b> the hit of the neighborhood.	I <b>am</b> the hit of the neighborhood.	I <b>will be</b> the hit of the neighborhood.

Let's look at some verbs associated with gardening:

I water > I water <u>ed</u>	I plant > I plant <u>ed</u>	I shovel > I shove <u>ed</u>
I toil > I toiled <u>ed</u>	I pull > I pulled <u>ed</u>	I dig > I digged <b>???</b> <b>digged??</b>

Digged isn't a verb; dug is the past tense form of dig. This makes the word "dig" an irregular verb because the form of the word changes to show past tense rather than just having **-ed** added onto the end of it. Irregular verbs aren't always easy to figure out and don't always make sense.

This is an example of a regular verb; this makes sense:

I **shoveled** too much snow yesterday. >> past tense verb indicated by the **-ed** suffix.

I **shovel** snow for the cardio benefits. >> present tense

I **will shovel** the snow tomorrow after work. >> future tense

This makes no sense:

I **was** the best at coloring in my kindergarten class. >> past tense

I **am** the best at coloring in my kindergarten class. >> present tense

I **will be** the best at coloring in my kindergarten class. >> future tense

Other than just memorizing irregular verbs, there is no simple way to learn them because there are more than 400 of them, 200 of which are used in everyday speech. Your best bet: look the word up in the dictionary to find out its proper past tense form.