

Good Writing Practice

Grammatical disagreement in tense

II – Present Participle, Progressive Verb

Introduction

In this regular feature, the disagreement in tense is extended from present and present perfect tense (discussed in the previous edition of MEW) to an analysis of the frequently used present participle (of the participial phrase) and the infrequently used progressive verb (of the progressive phrase), each of which contains an *ing* syntactic unit.

The present participle component of the participial phrase functions primarily adjectivally but as a verbal retains verb-like qualities such as tense. The present progressive verb phrase is infrequently (if at all) used in research writing, possibly because of its informal narrative pattern (characterised by agent- and action-focused sentence constituents).

The following examples are analysed according to (1) the context of a conceptual component in a journal article section, (2) the type of syntactic unit (participle, progressive verb), and (3) the type of disagreement (time, certainty).

Experimental section

Part 1 – Results section: results statement and preliminary interpretation

Example: Present tense – disagreement in certainty

The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, indicating that the plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.

Revision 1

*The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, **a consistence which indicated** that the plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.*

Revision 2

*The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, **which indicated** that the plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.*

Notes

In the Example, the tense of the present participle *indicating* denotes a timeless truth rather than a circumspect preliminary interpretation.

A preliminary interpretation denotes information one conceptual level above a result statement. To a traditionalist, the preliminary interpretation may seem to belong in the Discussion section; however, an even higher level of conceptualisation, such as inference (including the Conclusion and Consequence) do belong in the Discussion section. Therefore, the more depth of the Discussion section, the more appropriate placement of a preliminary interpretation in the Results section.

In Revision 1, the usage of the past tense (as a past participle) is circumspect, befitting the care with which research was performed and interpreted. To write the past participle *indicated*, a *which* is required, inexplicitly modifying more than one of the constituents or even the whole sentence. This *which* (often termed the ‘vague’ *which*) ostensibly justifies usage of the antecedent marker *consistence* that identifies the inexplicit antecedent (Revision 1) being modified.

Usage of the antecedent marker *consistence* may seem as a hypercorrection and redundant, so despite its vagueness an adjective clause with the inexplicit marker *which* may be the preferred option (Revision 2).

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: research objective

Example: Present participle – disagreement in time

Unlike the previous study focusing on plasma alone, in the present study the function of the erythrocyte as well as plasma was tested.

Revision

*Unlike the previous study **focused** on plasma alone, in the present study the function of the erythrocyte as well as plasma was tested.*

SECTION EDITORS



Wendy Kingdom

info@wendykingdom.com



Amy Whereat

amy.whereat@speaktthespeech.fr

Notes

The present time of the present participle *focusing* is inconsistent with the past focus of the other sentence constituents (sentence orientation *previous study* and the sentence verb *were tested*). In the Revision, transformation into the past participle *focused* avoids the tense disagreement. Both the present and past participle adjectivally modify the noun *study*.

Another distraction of *study focusing on* is personification of an inanimate subject, which is less so in the past tense as *study focused on*.

Part 2 – Introduction section: research problem pertinent background and research problem

Example: Active progressive verb – disagreement in time

Although many researchers are looking for cementum-specific markers (that differentiate cementum from bone), their existence is still uncertain.

Revision

*Despite wide-spread interest, **existence is still uncertain of cementum-specific markers that differentiate cementum from bone.***

Notes

The progressive verb is just too narratively current. The narrative is a result of an ongoing present action of *are*, the agent *researchers*, and the narrative informal verb *looking*. In the Revision, the progressive tense is de-narrativised by replacement of the adverbial dependent clause (*although many researchers are looking*) with the tense-less prepositional phrase (*despite the wide-spread interest in cementum-specific markers*).



Part 3 – Discussion section: research consequence

Example: Passive progressive verb – misagreement in time

The present study may also be contributing to understanding magma transport mechanisms at mid-ocean ridges.

Revision

The present study may also **contribute** to understanding magma transport mechanisms at mid-ocean ridges.

Notes

The progressive verb, even in the passive voice *be*

timeless truth – a certainty characteristic of a non-professional tone, as is the highly informal narrative progressive tense.

Revision options:

Transformation of the present to past participle minimises the certainty in a preliminary interpretation. For replacement of the narrativism of the progressive tense, there are tenseless syntactic alternatives or the present tense.

Michael Lewis Schneir, PhD

Professor, Biomedical Sciences, Ostrow School of Dentistry of The University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA
schneir@usc.edu

contributing, indicating a present on-going action, is in misagreement to a consequence of past research. In the revision, the present tense *may also contribute* conveys a time-independent consequence in the present and even future time.

Summary

Rhetorical consequence: The frequent usage of a present participle to denote a preliminary interpretation in the Results section connotes a

Schematised misagreement in tense – distractions and preferred revisions

Present Participle Misagreement

Introduction: research objective

Transformation:

present → past participle

Unlike the previous study focusing on plasma alone, in the present study the function of the erythrocyte as well as plasma was tested.

→ Unlike the previous study **focused** on plasma alone, in the present study the function of the erythrocyte as well as plasma was tested.

Results: results statement and preliminary interpretation

Replacement:

present participle → past tense adjective clause

The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, indicating that the

plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.

→ The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, **which indicated** that the plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.

Progressive Verb Misagreement

Introduction: research problem pertinent background and research problem

Replacement:

adverb clause → tenseless prepositional phrase

Although many researchers are looking for cementum-specific markers (that differentiate cementum from bone), their existence is still uncertain.

→ **Despite wide-spread interest, the existence is still uncertain of cementum-specific markers that differentiate cementum from bone.**

Discussion: research consequence

Transformation:

progressive verb phrase → present tense finite verb

The present study may also be contributing to understanding magma transport mechanisms at mid-ocean ridges.

→ The present study may also **contribute** to understanding magma transport mechanisms at mid-ocean ridges.