Good Writing Practice

Grammatical misagreement in tense

I – Present, present perfect

SECTION EDITORS

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Introduction

Each of the sections of a journal article contains anticipated conceptual components, which can be expressed by a specific verb tense for the perspective of time and the degree of certainty. In this regular feature, distractions of the present and present perfect tense are exemplified, revised, and analysed. The examples are organised first according to anticipated conceptual component, second to tense (present, present perfect), and third to time or certainty in the context of the anticipated conceptual component.

As stated in books on linguistics, there are only two tenses: present and past. All the others are considered as *aspect* requiring the auxiliary *will* (future), *have* (present perfect), *had* (past perfect), *to be* (progressive). However, for simplicity, the more common expression *tense* is used.

Experimental sections

Part 1 – Materials and Methods section: Method

Example: Present tense – misagreement in time

The reactive protocols are decomposed into mechanistic steps to gain insight into the performance variations across mobility protocols.

Revision

*The reactive protocols **were** decomposed into mechanistic steps to gain insight into the performance variations across mobility protocols.*

Notes

The usage of the past tense to denote completed methodologic action is the least controversial of all the uses of tense in the journal article, probably because it usually pertains to a physical not cognitive effort.

Similarly, the source of materials is expressed in the past: *The data **were** (not are) from the 1992 Fertility Survey in China, which was accomplished by a stratified, two-stage, systematic, and cluster sampling in 1992 (Ref.).*

Furthermore, most of the conceptual components in a journal article are expressed in the past tense, except for the following present tense usage: INTRODUCTION section (known research problem pertinent background, the actual hypothesis); DISCUSSION section (recommended future research, research consequence).

Part 2 – Results section: result statement/observation

Example: Present tense – misagreement in certainty

There are significantly more ridge deficiencies in the coronal halves of the ridges than in the apical halves (Fig. 1).

Revision

*There **were** significantly more ridge deficiencies in the coronal halves of the ridges than in the apical halves (Fig. 1).*

Notes

Result statements (comparisons, observations, trends) are cognitive efforts expressing pastness and thereby connoting understatement; that is, *something was* rather than the truism that *something is*.

Part 3 – Materials and Methods section: experimental approach

Example: Present perfect tense – misagreement in time

To investigate the function of syndecan-1 in dental mesenchyme condensation, syndecan-1 expression has been measured in Msx1 knockout mouse tooth germs.

Revision

*To investigate the function of syndecan-1 in dental mesenchyme condensation, syndecan-1 expression **was measured** in Msx1 knockout mouse tooth germs.*

Notes

The present perfect tense is surprisingly common in research writing. Its meaning is *up to the present time* as in the research problem *the causes have been unresolved*. However, the present perfect is grammatically distracting for expressing retrospectively past completed experimentation by the current authors.

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: hypothesis

Example: Present tense – misagreement in time and certainty

We hypothesise that the enhancement of the free radical level in the tissue increases the AB neurotoxicity.

Revision 1

*We **hypothesised** that the enhancement of the free radical level in the tissue increases the AB neurotoxicity.*

Notes

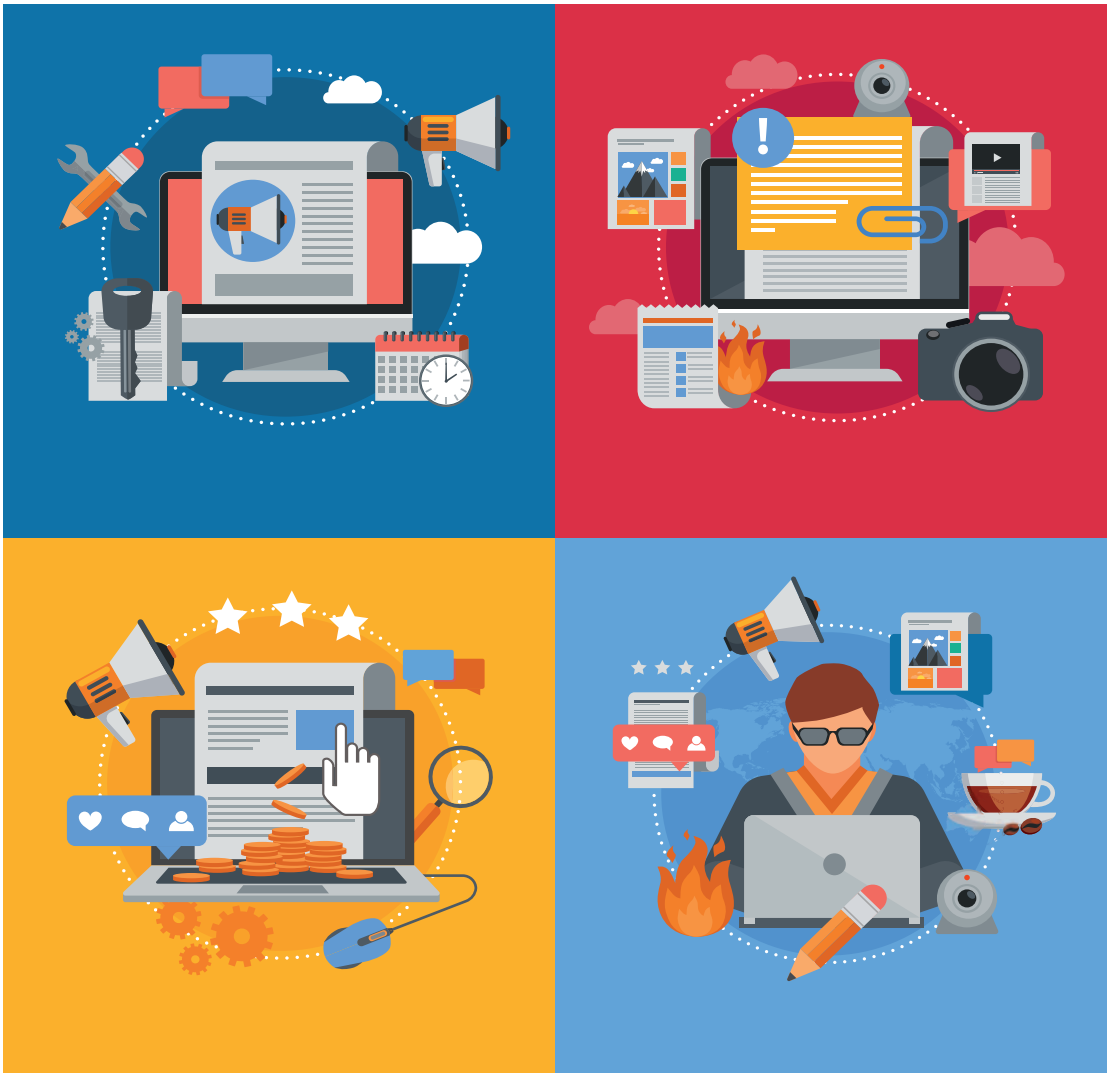
Why express the hypothesis statement in the present tense? Just as no one would write the present tense for a statement of a physical action in the Methods section, the same applies to a cognitive past effort, such as stating the hypothesis. In contrast, the actual hypothesis –not the act of stating – is meant to be a timeless truth, expressed in the present tense (*increases* not *increased*). Thus, the statement of a hypothesis consists of verbs of a mixed tense.

Additionally, should not the act of stating an objective in an Introduction – just like the act of stating a hypothesis – be in the past tense? The statement was at the time preceding the experimentation, justifying the use of the past perfect (*had been hypothesised*), but the past perfect seems stilted compared to use of the simple past (*was hypothesised*).

Part 2 – Discussion section: conclusion

Example: Present tense – misagreement in certainty

In conclusion, the enhanced free radical level in



the tissue increases the AB neurotoxicity.

Revision

In conclusion, the enhanced free radical level in the tissue ***increased*** *the AB neurotoxicity.*

Notes

In the Discussion section, another example of past tense usage instead of the present is the Conclusion. An understated modest conclusion is viewed as an author's respect for the scientific method and peers. Why not relinquish a more certain conclusion to other authors who may convey in the Introduction of their paper the information as accepted (present tense) by the discipline: *the enhanced free radical level in the tissue increases the AB neurotoxicity*.

Part 3 – Introduction section: research problem pertinent background

Example: Present perfect tense – misagreement in time

Welles has reported that administration of the synthetic glucocorticoid dexamethasone beginning at the defined commitment stage inhibited differentiation and mineral deposition in MC3T3-E1 cells (Ref.).

Revision 1

Welles ***reported*** *that administration of the synthetic glucocorticoid dexamethasone beginning at the defined commitment stage inhibited differentiation and mineral deposition in MC3T3-E1 cells (Ref.).*

Revision 2

Administration of the synthetic glucocorticoid dexamethasone beginning at the defined commitment stage inhibited differentiation and mineral deposition in MC3T3-E1 cells (Ref.).

Notes

The past tense (in Revision 1) is more appropriate for conveying the past action of reporting. In Revision 2, even better may be to avoid the non-thematic focus on the investigator in the subject position.

Part 4 – Introduction section: research problem pertinent background

Example: Present perfect tense – misagreement in certainty

Smith has shown there were significantly more ridge deficiencies in the coronal halves of the ridges than in the apical halves (Ref.).

Revision 1

There ***are*** *significantly more ridge deficiencies in the coronal halves of the ridges than in the apical halves (Smith, date).*

Notes

The present perfect (*has shown*) is frequently used for conveying the results of other investigators, which is inexplicitly intermediate between unaccepted certainty (expressed in the past tense)




and certainty (expressed in the present tense). Perhaps, the present perfect, expressing up to and including the present, renders more presentness and, thus, credibility to the statement. This usage of the present perfect seems justifiable for the verb *shows* in contrast to usage of the verb *reported*, which is clearly limited to a past time. However, if the intent is to convey current acceptance by the author and the discipline, the present tense is explicit compared with the present perfect as in: *Sialyl Lewis antigens expressed on carcinomas* ***bind*** *(not have been shown to bind) selectin ligands on endothelial cells (Ref.).*

Summary

Rhetorical consequence: Most misagreement distractions with regard to time are dissonance, but those involving the present tense conveying certainty are nonprofessional in tone.

Revision option: Transformation into the past tense is more common except for those few conceptual components for which the present tense (or present perfect) is appropriate.

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Schematised misagreement in tense - distractions and preferred revisions

Present tense misagreement

Materials and Methods

The reactive protocols are decomposed into mechanistic steps to gain insight into the performance variations across mobility protocols.

→ *The reactive protocols* ***were*** *decomposed into mechanistic steps to gain insight into the performance variations across mobility protocols.*

Results

There are significantly more ridge deficiencies in the coronal halves of the ridges than in the apical halves (Fig. 1).

→ *There* ***were*** *significantly more ridge deficiencies in the coronal halves of the ridges than in the apical halves (Fig. 1).*

Introduction

We hypothesise that the enhancement of the free radical level in the tissue increases the AB neurotoxicity.

→ *We* ***hypothesised*** *that the enhancement of the free radical level in the tissue increases the AB neurotoxicity.*

Discussion

In conclusion, the enhanced free radical level in the tissue increases the AB neurotoxicity.

→ In conclusion, the enhanced free radical level in the tissue **increased** the AB neurotoxicity.

Present perfect tense misagreement

Materials and Methods

To investigate the function of syndecan-1 in dental mesenchyme condensation, syndecan-1 expression has been measured in Msx1 knockout mouse tooth germs.

→ *To investigate the function of syndecan-1 in dental mesenchyme condensation, syndecan-1 expression* ***was measured*** *in Msx1 knockout mouse tooth germs.*

Introduction

Welles (Ref.) has reported that administration of the synthetic glucocorticoid dexamethasone beginning at the defined commitment stage inhibited differentiation and mineral deposition in MC3T3-E1 cells.

→ *Administration of the synthetic glucocorticoid dexamethasone beginning at the defined commitment stage* ***inhibited*** *differentiation and mineral deposition in MC3T3-E1 cells (Ref.).*

Introduction

Smith has shown that there were significantly more ridge deficiencies in the coronal halves of the ridges than in the apical halves (Ref.).

→ *There* ***are*** *significantly more ridge deficiencies in the coronal halves of the ridges than in the apical halves (Ref.).*