

Explore

Verb Tense

Verb tense might be difficult for any ELL students in your class. One verb, in particular, that ELL students struggle with is *do*. In English, *do* is used in at least four different ways – to show an action, as a sign of emphasis, to form a question, or as a substitute to save repetition of another verb or verb phrase. It is also an irregular verb, so the normal rules of conjugation do not apply. If you have students who are struggling, be sure to stay positive, be patient, and encourage them to treat these sentences like a puzzle with really weird pieces. Sometimes they don't fit together the way you thought they would, but once you understand the patterns, you can make most sentences work.

You may want to draw a timeline on the board to use as a visual as you describe when each type of tense should be used.

The future perfect tense is not discussed here because it rarely shows up on the ACT. However, if students ask about it or if you have advanced students, you may want to discuss it with them. You can explain it as “the past of the future” or something that will happen in the future before something else happens in the future to stop it. For example, “Before the storm hits, I will have fixed the roof.” The storm is going to hit in the future. Before that happens, but still in the future, I *will* have fixed the roof. Talk about when this tense should be used and how it is formed. Have students think of examples using each of the perfect tenses.

Your ELL students may have a particularly difficult time with present perfect tenses. These students may over use this tense when a past or present progressive tense is needed. It is important to be explicit about when to use each type of verb.

There is a special category of verbs, called *stative* verbs that only have a simple present tense, even if the action is going on right at the moment of speech. These include verbs like “love,” “believe,” “prefer,” and “see.” So it's never correct to say “I'm loving it,” “I'm seeing it,” or “I'm believing it.” Most action verbs, like “rain,” are called *dynamic* verbs, and they make the distinction described above: If it's happening right now, you use continuous tense, and if it happens repeatedly, you use simple present.

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VERBS

Verbs are words that express an action or state of being. In this chapter, we will discuss how verbs are used in sentences to mean different things as well as how to use verbs correctly. The ACT tests two big errors: verbs in the wrong tense and verbs that do not match their subjects.

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to

- classify different tenses of verbs
- determine whether the subject and verb of a sentence are in agreement
- compose sentences using appropriate verb tense and subject-verb agreement
- understand how subject-verb agreement is tested on the ACT

Verb Tense

Tense indicates when an action occurs, in relation to the present and sometimes in relation to other verbs. If you use the wrong tense, it is unlikely that someone will be confused. If you write:

I go to the store yesterday.

Most people will easily understand that you mean this:

I went to the store yesterday.

So why use the correct tense? It's a matter of etiquette, and using the wrong tense is like using the wrong utensil at dinner – you may be able to eat pasta with your fingers at a fancy restaurant, but the social rules tell you not to, and people will stare.

The ACT will judge you just as harshly for using the wrong tense as other diners would if you ate pasta with your fingers. So it makes a lot of sense to memorize the rules and make sure you use the right tense for written English, even if it sounds fine to use a different tense in speech. To know what tense to use, look at two things: the other verbs in the sentence and *time words*. If a verb is happening at the same time as another verb, they need to have the same tense. And *time words* like *since*, *until*, *yesterday*, *tomorrow*, and *currently* will help you decide which tense to use.

Here are some examples of different tenses that are *required* by the time words that go with them.

It *has been snowing* since yesterday evening.

It *is snowing* outside right now.

It *snows* in Massachusetts every winter.

It *had been snowing up until* yesterday morning.

All verbs have a **base form**. The base form is the form of the word you would look up in the dictionary. It does not have any special endings added to it. Think of it as the infinitive form of the verb without the word “to.” The base form can be *conjugated*, or changed with the addition of endings, to show that an action happened at different times.

There are three basic tenses: simple past, simple present, and simple future. Let's look at an example of each in action:

Past:	She watched the music video.	They watched the music video.
Present:	She watches the music video.	They watch the music video.
Future:	She will watch the music video.	They will watch the music video.

To show that an action has already occurred, you use the **past tense**. For regular verbs, you add an *-ed* to the end regardless of whether the subject is singular or plural. To show that the action is occurring right now, you use the **present tense**. With present tense, you use the base form of the verb. If the subject is singular you need to add an *-s* or *-es*. If the subject is plural, the base form remains unchanged. To show that something has not happened yet, but will, you use the **future tense**. For future tense, you need to use the helping verb “will” along with the base form of the verb. As with past tense, it does not matter whether the subject is singular or plural.

There are some more complex tenses that can be used. The most common that you will see on tests like the ACT are **perfect tenses**. Perfect tenses are used to show the relationship between two actions. There are three perfect tenses: past perfect, present perfect, and future perfect. The latter is not as common, so we will not focus on it.

Let's look at an example past perfect tense.

Past Perfect: The concept for MTV **had been** around since 1966, although the channel didn't launch until 1981.

This is probably not something students need to know, but it's important to know if it comes up in questions. Verbs are all either stative or dynamic, although some can be both (with two different meanings).

The **past perfect** tense is used to show that two actions occurred in the past, but one action occurred before the other. Because the past perfect verb has to occur before the other verb, you cannot use past perfect unless you are discussing another past tense verb or another point in the past.

Past tense	Present tense	Future tense
Past perfect tense: "had" + participle	Present perfect tense: "has" or "have" + participle	Future perfect tense: "will have" + participle

Let's look at examples of present perfect tense.

Present perfect: MTV **has aired** many global benefit concerts.

Present perfect: The global benefit concerts **have raised** MTV's profile since they began in the 1980s.

The **present perfect** tense is used when an action happened at an unspecified time before now or, it started in the past and is continuing to occur now. This tense does not exist in many other languages, and many people use simple past tense in place of it in speech, so present perfect is one of the most challenging tenses to use correctly in English.

Notice that for all of these tenses, a helping verb must be used along with the past participle. The **past participle**, for most verbs, is the same as the simple past tense: an *-ed* is added to the base form of the verb. However, irregular verbs do not follow this pattern. One common irregular verb is *to be*. As shown with the past perfect example above, the past participle of *to be* is *been*.

For past perfect verbs, the helping verb *had* is used. For present perfect verbs, the helping verb *has* or *have* is used depending on whether the subject is singular or plural.

Continuous tenses are formed when you add *is*, *are*, or *am*, or in the past tense, *was* or *were* to the present participle (a form of the verb ending in *-ing*). This tense is easy to make, but is only required when you are talking about an action that is occurring at a particular moment.

It **is raining** outside *right now*.

It would be wrong to say "It rains outside right now," because "it rains" is only used for repeated actions, like this:

It **rains frequently** in the spring.

The time words that we discussed above help you out here. "Right now," for example, requires a continuous tense, while "frequently" requires that you **not** use a continuous tense. Most, but not all, verbs have a continuous tense.

When you use verbs, it is important to be consistent in your writing. Often, authors will use time indicators to show whether the sentence takes place in the past, present, or future. Some common time indicators for actions that occurred in the past are *yesterday*, *earlier*, *last week*, and *then*. Words like *currently* and *presently* indicate an action is happening now. Words like *tomorrow*, *eventually*, or *next* indicate a future action. Words and phrases like *since yesterday* and *so far this month* indicate a need for a present perfect. Words like *until* with a past verb indicate the need for a past perfect verb. Using time indicators along with the proper tense will help clarify your writing.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Every sentence must have a subject and a verb. Writing sentences, you must make sure that these two parts of speech agree with each other. If the subject is singular (meaning only one), then the verb must also be singular. If the subject is plural (more than one), the verb must also be plural. Look at the sentence below and choose the correct verb:

The LiveAid concert (was / were) shown on MTV.

What is the subject of the sentence? Is it singular or plural?

Which verb do you need to match the subject?

For all present-tense verbs in the third person (when *he*, *she*, or *it* is the subject), the singular form ends in *-s* or *-es*, which is the opposite of most nouns. There are only two verbs that have irregular present tense in English. These are *is*, which becomes *are* in plural, and *has*, which is *have* in plural. This means that picking the right form of the verb is easy once you have done the hard job of deciding whether the subject is singular or plural.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether a word is singular or plural. Most of these tricky cases are singular in English. These include mass nouns (words that refer to an uncounted quantity, such as furniture, energy, fat, legislation, humidity, business, blood, water) and collective nouns (the government, Paraguay, the company, the group). All of these mass and collective nouns take the singular form of the verb.

For most pronouns, it is clear whether they are singular or plural. However, there are a few pronouns that can be either singular or plural depending on the context. In each of the examples below, underline the subject and circle the verb.

All of MTV's programming was suspended after the September 11 attacks.

All of the rock-focused shows were cancelled in the late 1990s.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Answer: The subject is *concert*, which is singular. The correct verb is *was*.

Subject-verb agreement is one of the hardest topics for many ELL students. You will often see them using singular verbs with plural subjects and vice-versa. Therefore, it is very important that you have them stop and take apart the sentence one piece at a time. First, have them identify the subject and determine whether it is singular or plural. Then, have them identify the action and write it using the same plurality. To help students remember the relationship between subjects and verbs, you can tell them that *typically* "exactly one *-s*" is allowed: if the subject ends in an *-s*, then the verb cannot end in an *-s* (and vice versa).