

The Writing Center

Verb Tenses

There are twelve verb tenses in English. Use the following charts to help you understand how and when to use these tenses in your writing.

PRESENT

Tense	Present Simple (base form, add –s to base)	Present Continuous (be + -ing ending)	Present Perfect (have + past participle)	Present Perfect Continuous (have + be + present participle)
Usage	Use for habits and typical actions in the present, facts and general truths, and for writing a summary (MLA format).	Use for actions happening right now and presently over a period of time (but not at the moment of speaking).	Use for actions that have just ended and for actions that started in the past and are still true today.	Use for actions that have lasted for some time by now and are still going on and for actions that have been going on lately.
Example	I argue she teaches	I am arguing She is teaching	I have argued She has taught	I have been arguing She has been teaching
Time Expressions	usually; every day; often; never.	right now; at the moment; at present	already; just; yet; never; for; since.	for an hour; all day; for; since.

PAST

Tense	Past Simple (add –ed to base)	Past Continuous (was/were + present participle)	Past Perfect (had + past participle)	Past Perfect Continuous (had + been + present participle)
Usage	Use for completed actions that started and ended in the past.	Use for actions going on (1) when another past action happened or (2) at some point of time in the past.	Use for an action that happened before another past action or before some point of time in the past.	Use for an incomplete action that lasted for some time before another past action or before some point of time in the past.
Example	I argued She taught	I was arguing They were teaching	I had argued She had taught	I had been arguing She had been teaching

Time Expressions	yesterday; last year; two hours ago.	while; when; at five o'clock yesterday	by the time; before; after; by 1998	by the time; before; after; by yesterday; by 2005; for a long time.
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FUTURE

Tense	Future Simple (will + base OR be + going to + base)	Future Continuous (will + be + present participle)	Future Perfect (will + have + past participle)	Future Perfect Continuous (will + have + been + present participle)
Usage	Use for actions that will happen in the future.	Use for an action going on (1) when another future action happens or (2) at some point of time in the future.	Use for an action that will happen before another future action or before some point of time in the future.	Use for an action that will last for some time before another future action or before some point of time in the future.
Examples	I will argue She is going to argue	I will be arguing She will be arguing	I will have argued She will have argued	I will have been arguing She will have been arguing
Time Expressions	tomorrow; in a few days; next week; in 2025; in the future.	at three tomorrow; at this time next year; when.	by the time; by 2035; by tomorrow; before.	by the time; by 2030; before; for two hours.

Practice: Read the following sentences and identify the tenses of the verbs in bold. Use the charts above and on the other side of the page to help you.

Example: I think he **will go** to the writing center next week. **Answer:** Future Simple

1. This year, more students than ever **are** actively **pursuing** an undergraduate education.
2. Charles Murray **argues** that too many people are going to college.
3. Those who **have not** yet **registered** for Fall semester may not get the classes they want.
4. By the time he arrived at the library, the orientation **had** already **started**.
5. He **graduated** with a 4.0 G.P.A.

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Common Verb Tenses in Essay Writing—Present Simple

The **present simple** is often used in essay writing

- 1) to describe habits or typical repeated actions
- 2) to inform readers of facts and truths
- 3) to summarize articles and authors' points of view
- 4) to introduce quotations.

Here are some examples of **present simple** from student essays:

- 1) In the middle of an economic downturn, different factors **create** problems for people who **are not prepared** to make important decisions in a short amount of time.
- 2) In fact, students who **do not attend** the majority of their college classes often **fail**.
- 3) In the article, “Are Too Many People Going to College?” Charles Murray **argues** that the majority of young people today who **desire** to obtain a Bachelor’s degree **are** in school for the wrong reasons.
- 4) Murray **explains** the stigma attached to not having a B.A. when he **writes**, “Employers do not value what the student learned, just that the student has a degree.”

Practice 1: Fill in the blanks with the correct form of an appropriate verb in the present simple tense.

1. Charles Murray _____ that getting a college degree is not the only path to financial success for today’s Americans.
2. Some people _____ natural born talent that they can put in use with or without an education background.
3. While John Stuart Mill _____ that college creates “capable and cultivated human beings,” he also warns against students going to college for the wrong reasons.
4. Students who study hard and manage their time well usually _____ in college.

Practice 2: Write a paragraph explaining your own view on why students choose to attend NPU. Practice using the present simple tense.

Verb Tenses in Essay Writing—Past Simple vs. Present Perfect

The **past simple** is often used in essay writing to retell past experiences and observations as well as for other completed actions that started and ended at a specific time in the past. The **present perfect**, less frequent in essay writing, is used for actions:

- 1) that happen over a period of time and began in the past
- 2) that “just” happened or are recently complete.

Here are some student examples of **past simple** and **present perfect** from student essays:

- 1) When I first **attended** college in 1985, I **was** there for all of the wrong reasons.
- 2) My brother **began** his studies at Wright College at age 32, **transferred** to Loyola University three years later, and **graduated** with a Bachelor’s degree in Biology last spring.
- 3) My writing this semester **has improved** in the areas of thesis development, organization, and correction of subject-verb agreement errors.
- 4) As noted in the Truman News, “Since Chancellor Hyman **has launched** Reinvention in 2010, the number of students earning degrees each year **has** nearly **doubled**.”

Practice 1: Fill in the blanks with the correct form of an appropriate verb in the past simple or present perfect tense.

1. I already _____ Speech 101 and Math 118 last semester.
2. According to the Chicago Tribune, the homicide rate in Chicago _____ since 2012, surpassing that of Los Angeles and New York City for the same time period.
3. Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg _____ at the City Colleges of Chicago graduation ceremony at UIC Pavilion on Saturday, May 3rd, 2014.
4. Like many four-year universities, North Park University also has its share of professional students: those who _____ for years but have no concrete plan to graduate in the near future.

Practice 2: Write a paragraph recalling your student experience at NPU so far. How long have you been a student here? What have you accomplished? Practice using the past simple and present perfect tenses.