Verb Tenses

It is important to maintain continuity of verb tenses throughout your writing to properly convey the timeframe that you wish to express. Successful writers maintain one tense throughout the entire paper and only shift tenses to indicate changes in the timeframe, relative to the main tense.

When to use PRESENT TENSE:
• When discussing facts
• When discussing habitual actions
• When discussing your own idea

When to use PAST TENSE:
• When discussing events that happened in the past
• When discussing someone else’s ideas

Hint One:
When you proofread your paper, mark every verb to check if it is the same tense throughout the whole section.

Example:
CORRECT
I had a delicious breakfast and then ate a big lunch and finished with a gourmet dinner.

INCORRECT
I had a delicious breakfast and then ate a big lunch and finish with a gourmet dinner.

Explanation:
If the section begins in past tense, it is important to maintain past tense.

Exceptions:
1. When shifting from a general description to a specific time frame

Example: I have (present) a very good relationship with my parents. Just last night, I went (past) over to their house and talked (past) to them for hours.

2. When discussing present activity about past events.

Example: I love (present) candy but my teeth are (present) bad because I ate (past) so much candy as a child.
Hint Two:
Different tenses take different modals:

PRESENT PERFECT:

I can run today.
I will run tomorrow.
I have run all of my life.

PAST PERFECT:

I could run when I was younger.
I would run around the track when I was a child.
I had run in a famous race.

FUTURE PERFECT:

I could run tomorrow.
I would run with you this week but I am busy.
I will have ten papers to write this semester.