

27. CHOOSING THE CORRECT VERB TENSE AND FORM IN CONTEXT

Not all verbs are equal! Different contexts require different verb tenses and different verb forms. When you write, think about where you are in time. Look for key words. For example, “*Last month*,” in the opening sentence, is in the past, so you’ll want to use the past tense.

Read this paragraph. Notice the underlined verbs. They will be explained below.

Dear Diary,

Last month, I applied (1) to graduate school. I had been thinking (2) about doing this for a long time, and I finally did it. Before I sent in my application, I had called (3) the school because I wanted to talk (4) to the head of the department about the program I was interested in. She was working (5) hard on her department’s budget when I called, but she said she could talk (6) to me for a few minutes. Half an hour later, we were still talking (7)! Today is (8) Thursday. I am sitting (9) at my desk trying to concentrate on my writing. Worrying (10) about my application will make (11) me crazy. I must think about something else. What’s that? The doorbell has just rung (12). Maybe it’s the mailman . . . Later: I’m in! I made it! I was accepted! (13) Graduate school, here I come! I have been dreaming (14) about this for a long time. I’ll be in school for another two years. By the time I get (15) my MS, I will have been (16) in school for 17 years altogether, and I will have been studying (17) biology for six years. That’s a long time, but I think it will be time well spent.

- 1. Simple past.** This is an action completed at a specific time in the past. “*Last month*” is the key word.
- 2. Past perfect continuous.** This action began in the past, went on for a while, and ended in the past.
- 3. Past perfect.** Use this for an action in the past that was completed before another action, also in the past. Here, I had called the school before I sent in the application. “*Before*” is the keyword.
- 4. Infinitive.** This frequently comes after verbs expressing desire or intent: *I wanted to talk, I hoped to hear, I expected to go.*
- 5. Past continuous.** This action began in the past and continued for a while. Use this tense if the continuing action was interrupted – here, by the call.
- 6. Modal and verb.** *Could* is a modal, which changes the meaning of the verb. Modals are followed by the base form of the verb, which in this sentence is “*talk*.”
- 7. Past continuous.** Again, an action continues for a while; here there’s no interruption.
- 8. Simple present.** “*Today*” is the keyword; it implies the present.
- 9. Present continuous.** Use this, not the present tense, to describe an action going on right now.
- 10. Gerund.** This is an *-ing* verb form that is being used as the subject of the sentence. Although it is a verb form, it is doing the job of a noun.
- 11. Future.** This describes something that has not happened yet but will happen at some point.
- 12. Present perfect.** This implies that the action happened in the very recent past – here, a few seconds ago. The key word is “*just*,” which means that the action was recent.
- 13. Passive voice.** This is not a verb tense. You can use the passive voice in the past, present or future. Use it when you mean that something was done to someone or something, rather than that the person or thing did something.
- 14. Present perfect continuous.** This action began in the past, continued for a while in the past, and is still going on now. *I’m still dreaming about going to graduate school; I’m not there yet.*
- 15. Simple present.** Even though the key phrase “*By the time*” has a future meaning, we use the simple present because *will* is never used in future time clauses.
- 16. Future perfect.** Here the author is imagining himself in the future, looking back into the past. At the moment, he has been in school for 15 years. Two years from now, his time in school will add up to 17 years.
- 17. Future perfect continuous.** He is seeing himself in the future, looking back at the past. This tense implies that, two years from now, he will not stop studying. The action will continue. Compare # 16. The future perfect implies that in two years, he will complete 17 years of formal education. The action will end.