

8-2012

Verbs: The Basics on Tense and Voice

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Concordia University School of Law, tfordyce@cu-portland.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.cu-portland.edu/lawfaculty>

 Part of the [Legal Writing and Research Commons](#)

CU Commons Citation

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff, Verbs: The Basics on Tense and Voice, *Advocate*, Aug. 2012, at 48.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Law at CU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of CU Commons. For more information, please contact libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu.

VERBS: THE BASICS ON TENSE AND VOICE

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff
Concordia University
School of Law

At the end of my first year of teaching, one of my students approached me with a sheepish question: He wanted help understanding the difference between voice and verb tense. At first, I was aghast. But then I realized his confusion made sense. I had just addressed passive voice, in the context of finding and fixing passive voice—an activity that requires you to look for a combination of verbs in a particular tense. Of course voice and verb tense could get mixed up!

I'm sure there are other writers out there who also get a little confused by verbs in all their permutations. After all, verbs have voice, mood, tense, number, and person. There are regular verbs and irregular verbs; a verb can be linking, transitive, or intransitive, depending on the types of objects or complements it can take; verbs can be auxiliary or main verbs; verbs even stop functioning as verbs and appear as verbal phrases or gerunds.

Whew! Covering all that would be way too much grammar for one month. So, here's a refresher on the basics of verb tense and voice.

Tense

Tense refers to when in time an action happened (or is happening, or will happen). Each verb has three tenses: past, present, and future. Each tense has four different aspects: simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous.

A verb with a simple aspect indicates actions that occur at a point in time or on a repeated or habitual basis.

I researched yesterday. (past simple)

I research everyday. (present simple)

I will research tomorrow. (future simple)

A verb with a continuous aspect indicates that the action takes place over time; in the past and future tense verbs with continuous aspect are used to indicate the temporal relationship with another action. These verbs always use part of the verb



“be” as the first part of the verb phrase and end with the main verb + ing.

I was researching when the phone rang. (past continuous)

I am researching now. (present continuous)

I will be researching next week when you visit. (future continuous)

A verb with a perfect aspect indicates either that an action happened at an unspecified time in the past or that the action has or will end before another action. These verbs always use part of “to have” as the first part of the verb phrase and ends with the past form of the main verb.

I had researched one issue when the phone rang. (past perfect)

I have researched many issues. (present perfect)

I will have researched all the issues by Friday. (future perfect)

Finally, a verb with a perfect continuous aspect indicates that the action happens over time and continues into the present, or happened over time before another action. These verbs start with the relevant part of the verb “to have” followed by “been” and ends with the main verb + ing.

I had been researching only a short time before I found the answer. (past perfect continuous)

I have been researching for over fourteen hours. (present perfect continuous)

I will have been researching all day. (future perfect continuous)

Each verb has three tenses: past, present, and future. Each tense has four different aspects: simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous.

Tense and aspect work together to create layers of action. By combining different tenses and aspects, we can re-create the reality of time in our writing.

It was a dark and stormy night. I had been researching for only twelve hours when the phone rang. I heard an ominous voice say, “That motion must be filed tomorrow. You should plan on being here all night.”

Active v. passive voice

Verbs can be either active or passive, depending on whether the subject of the sentence is doing the action of the verb. A verb is active when the subject of the sentence is performing the action of the **verb**.

The driver had been drinking.

A verb is passive when the subject of the sentence isn't performing the action of the **verb**.

She was hit by a drunk driver.



Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

To identify passive verbs, you have to look for a specific two-verb combination. Passive verbs are always formed with a form of the verb “to be” and the past participle of another verb (a verb ending in -d, -ed, -n, -en, or -t).¹ In the example above, we have a form of “to be” (was), and a past participle (hit).

Now, passive voice can get a confusing because it can happen in several tenses.

The truck **is being driven** by Bob.
(passive/present continuous)

The unsuspecting pedestrian **was hit** by a blue pick-up truck. (passive/past tense)

And it can also get confusing because two-verb combinations can be used to form active verbs in various tenses.

The public defender **had defended** this client before. (active/ past perfect)

He **is preparing** a motion in limine to exclude his client’s history of leaving rehab. (active/ present progressive)

So, don’t be fooled when you see a “to be” verb or a two-verb combination. Instead, look first to see if the subject of your sentence is doing the action of the verb and then look for a “to be” verb and a past participle.

So, don't be fooled when you see a "to be" verb or a two-verb combination. Instead, look first to see if the subject of your sentence is doing the action of the verb and then look for a "to be" verb and a past participle.

Conclusion

By understanding tense and voice, we can help the reader understand the reality of time and action. You can also create layers of time and hide or expose actions.

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is an Assistant Professor of Law and the Director of the Legal Research and Writing Program at Concordia University School of Law in Boise. She is also Of Counsel at Rainey Law Office, a boutique firm focusing on civil appeals. You can reach her at

tfordyce@cu-portland.edu or tfr@rainey-lawoffice.com.

Sources

- Terri LeClercq, *Guide to Legal Writing Style* 37-38 (Aspen 2004).
- Bryan A. Garner, *The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style* 158-60 (2d ed., West 2006).

Endnotes

¹ For tips on fixing passive voice in your writing, see “Adding People to Your Writing: Eliminating Passive Voice and Vague “ing” Words,” *The Advocate* 68-69 (November/December 2010), available at <https://isb.idaho.gov/pdf/advocate/issues/adv10novdec.pdf>.

**Planning.
Protection.
Peace of Mind.**



Structured Settlements
Structured Attorney Fees
Government Benefit Protection
Trust Services
Lien Resolution Services
Medicare Set-Asides (MSAs)

Comprehensive settlement planning for you and your client.



Audrey Kenney
akenney@tjsg.com
(208) 631-7298
www.tjsg.com

FARLEY | OBERRECHT
FARLEY OBERRECHT HARWOOD & BURKE, P.A.



PHILLIP S. OBERRECHT
Construction and Commercial Mediation Services
35 years of Construction and Commercial Litigation Experience

Key Financial Center | 702 West Idaho Street, Suite 700
Post Office Box 1271 | Boise, Idaho 83701
Telephone: (208) 395-8500 | Facsimile: (208) 395-8585
e-mail: psob@farleyoberrecht.com
www.farleyoberrecht.com