

Using Tense Correctly in your Research Study

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Knowing when to use which tense in your dissertation or thesis is a common problem for both native and non-native writers in English. As longtime dissertation mentors, we see this problem regularly. Here are some guidelines for you to follow in correctly using tense.

Tense usage in your Proposal: Since a proposal is a blueprint or a plan for a study that has not yet been conducted, any reference to your study needs to be in the **future** tense:

Example: In this proposed qualitative phenomenological study, the lived experiences of nurses working in disaster zones will be explored.

Tense references to other studies:

Any reference to a study that has been published should be in the **past** tense. However, any statement regarding a theory, program, concept, or policy that is still in effect, should be in the **present** tense.

For example:

1. If simulation technology is still going on, then: "Simulation technology *provides* techniques designed to enhance the skills of healthcare providers", rather than 'provided' techniques designed to enhance the skills of healthcare providers.
2. If the simulation technology was used in the past, then: "In a study to determine the efficacy of simulation technology, Brown (2016) *surveyed* 140 healthcare professionals who have used this technology and 140 healthcare professionals who did not use the technology".

Per pp. 42-43 of the APA Publication Manual, you should use past tense or present perfect tense for discussing literature, an action or condition that occurred at a specific time in the past.

For example, Smith (2015) *found* or Smith (2015) *has found...*, or “Previous research *showed* that children confuse the source of their memories more often than adults” (Barney, 2013; Jones, 2015).

Tense Usage in Your Final Study

In the proposal chapters of a dissertation (1-3), a common error is to neglect to change future tense to past tense and remove language referring to the proposal. If you search for ***will*** or ***propose***, you can locate proposal remnants and areas to update the dissertation so that the completed study is referenced only in the past tense.

Always use present tense to discuss implications and to present conclusions.

There are ways to write in active voice and use past tense by rephrasing sentences, such as in the following examples:

Incorrect: Passive voice: “Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 mid-level managers to explore their lived experiences”.

Incorrect: Anthropomorphism: “Semi-structured interviews identified the lived experiences of 20 mid-level managers (See APA page 69).”

Correct: Twenty mid-level managers participated in semi-structured interviews and shared their lived experiences.

Use past tense to describe the results, but present tense to discuss implications when discussing your conclusions.

Example: “The weight of livestock increased as the nutritional value of feed increased. These results suggest that feeds higher in nutritional value contribute to greater weight gain in livestock.” (Use past tense to indicate what you found [weight increased], but present tense to suggest what result implies)

Chapter Introduction: When you are explaining the contents of a chapter in the chapter, the present tense is used.

For Example: Chapter 2 *includes* a review of the literature.

Chapter Summary: Use the past tense to explain what the current chapter included, and the present tense to explain the contents of the next chapter.

Example: Chapter 2 *included* a review of the literature. Chapter 3 *includes* a discussion of the methodology used in the study.