

Problems with Verbs

Here's the Idea

Verbs play an essential role in your writing; errors in verb use can detract from otherwise good writing. Common problems include misuse of tenses and confusion of similar verbs.

Improper Shifts in Tense

An **improper shift**, a common problem in writing, is the use of two different tenses to describe two or more actions that occur at the same time.

Use the same tense to describe two or more actions that occur at the same time.

Improper Shift

Sleep scientists have been studying the sleeping brain, and psychologists study dreams.

Correct

Sleep scientists have been studying the sleeping brain, and psychologists have been studying dreams. (Both actions began at an indefinite time in the past and continue in the present.)

Improper Shift

Many people enjoy their nighttime dreams but considered their daydreams ordinary.

Correct

Many people enjoy their night dreams but consider their daydreams ordinary. (Both actions take place in the present.)

Although you want to avoid incorrect shifts in tense, sometimes a shift in tense is necessary to express a change in time or a sequence of events.

Use different verb tenses and forms to show how events are related in time or to emphasize them differently.

Victor often has dreamed of becoming a concert pianist, but he still refuses to practice the piano every day. (The verb tenses show that Victor's dreams occurred in the indefinite past, but his refusal to practice occurs in the present.)

► To show a sequence of past events, use the past perfect or past progressive tense to describe the older event and the simple past to describe the more recent one.

STUDENT MODEL

After he **had suffered** the terrors of the Holocaust, Wiesel **wrote** about his experiences in his first book, *Night*. Once he **had put** that nightmare into words, he **began** addressing the larger issues of what the Holocaust **said** about human nature in seven other books.

Wiesel first experienced the Holocaust and then wrote about it.

He first dealt with the Holocaust in *Night* and then wrote other books about it.

Commonly Confused Verbs

Several pairs of verbs are often confused because they have similar spellings and meanings.

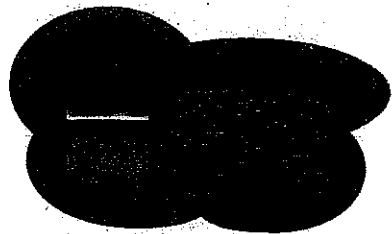
Commonly Confused Verbs			
	Meaning	Principal Parts	Example
lie	to rest in a flat position	lie, (is) lying, lay, (have) lain	Tell Tyler to lie down and take his nap.
lay	to place	lay, (is) laying, laid, (have) laid	I'll just lay the baby down and call you back.
rise	to go upward	rise, (is) rising, rose, (have) risen	Carmen lay in bed and waited for the sun to rise .
raise	to lift	raise, (is) raising, raised, (have) raised	She raised the blinds and let the sun pour in.
sit	to occupy a seat	sit, (is) sitting, sat, (have) sat	Will sat in the chair, exhausted.
set	to put or place	set, (is) setting, set, (have) set	I set the cake on the counter.
leave	to allow to remain	leave, (is) leaving, left, (have) left	Jerry's afraid to leave the cat and the dog alone.
let	to permit	let, (is) letting, let, (have) let	He never lets them sleep in the house.
bring	to carry toward	bring, (is) bringing, brought, (have) brought	Thanks for bringing all those pillows and blanket.
take	to carry away from	take, (is) taking, took, (have) taken	Yuri forgot to take her leftovers home with her.



One reason that *lie* and *lay* are often confused is that the past participle of *lie* is spelled *lay*.

She lies down for a nap every afternoon.

She lay down for a nap yesterday afternoon.



Incorrect Use of *Would Have*

Many people mistakenly use *would have* in *if* clauses to express a condition contrary to fact. In a case like the one below, use the past perfect tense.

Incorrect

If I would have used a warmer blanket, I would have slept better.

Correct

If I had used a warmer blanket, I would have slept better.

Misuse of *Would of, Should of, Could of, or Might Have*

Because the words sound alike, many people mistakenly write *would of, should of, could of, or might of* in place of *would have, should have, could have, or might have*. Remember that *would have, should have, could have* and *might have* are helping verbs.

Incorrect

Mirabel wished that she could of slept just ten minutes longer.

Correct

Mirabel wished that she could have slept just ten minutes longer.

② Why It Matters in Writing

Properly used tenses can help you express a complex sequence of events. Note the use of different tenses in the following model.

STUDENT MODEL

Miss Yolanda eventually boarded up her windows and bought locks for her doors. This was after she had stopped seeing her art students and just before she decided never to see anyone ever again. She had had enough.

PAST

Action occurs in the past.

PAST PERFECT

Action has been completed by the time the past actions occur.