

# Guide for use of appropriate verb tense for ELPA papers and dissertations

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, Fifth Ed., 2002)* provides guidance for doctoral dissertations and other papers written by students in our department.

Section 2.02, on page 33 includes the following statement:

Abruptness may result from sudden, unnecessary shifts in verb tense within the same paragraph or in adjacent paragraphs. By being consistent in the use of verb tenses, you can help ensure smooth expression. **Past tense** (e.g., "Smith *showed*") or **present perfect tense** (e.g., "researchers *have shown*") is appropriate for the literature review and the description of the procedure **if the discussion is of past events**. Stay within the chosen tense. Use past tense (e.g., "anxiety *decreased* significantly") to describe the results. Use the present tense (e.g., "the results of Experiment 2 *indicate*") to discuss the results and to present conclusions. By reporting conclusions in the present tense, you allow readers to join you in deliberating the matter at hand.

(See Section 2.06 for details on the use of tense.)

The foregoing statement (some parts highlighted for clarity) suggests that the past tense or present perfect tense should be used for any completed publication or research project. But, ongoing research, activities, current policy descriptions, current organizational practices, or rhetorical advocacy require the use of the present tense.

## **General recommendations:**

### **Dissertations:**

--- The parts of Chapter 1 (the introductory chapter) and Chapter 2 (the literature review) that cite publications should be in the past tense or present perfect tense, as described above. However, an exception to this practice is necessary to provide an accurate description of current/extant laws, procedures, policies, practices, or beliefs. (Appended to this document is an example from a student's literature review.)

--- The parts of Chapter 3 (the description of the research methodology) may be written in the present tense where the writer wants to indicate what exists in Chapters 4 or 5 on the day the dissertation is defended. The past tense may be used where the writer wants to indicate what research methods have been used in completing the research for the dissertation.

---The past tense should normally be used to describe the summary of findings from Chapter 4. The conclusions normally should be written in the present tense.

---Recommendations for further research and recommendations to improve practice normally should be written in either the present tense or the future tense.

### **Dissertation Proposals:**

Chapters 1 and 2 should follow the same patterns as described above for dissertations. Generally, Chapter 3, the research methodology chapter, should be written in the future tense.

**Example of a section of a literature review highlighting the need to use a mix of verb tenses to accurately portray current practice (from Autumn Edmonds draft of chapter 2 of her dissertation):**

With the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the responsibilities of elementary administrators and teachers greatly increased. Teachers **have seen** trends in education come and go, including: theme-based learning, phonics-based learning, curriculum mapping, thinking maps, authentic assessments, more testing, less testing, and differentiated learning. Such changes seem to **occur** annually with the passage of new laws and new curricula, so that teachers are constantly learning and adapting. However, one law **has had** a major impact on education; the No Child Left Behind Act implemented major provisions for each state to follow. These provisions **include**:

1. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Adequate Yearly Progress **requires** each state to create an accountability system of assessments, graduation rates, and other indicators.
2. Teacher Quality. All teachers **have to be** *highly qualified*, as defined in the law.
3. Student Testing. All students **are** assessed annually in reading and math in grades 3 through 8.
4. Parental Involvement. States **are required** to issue a detailed report card on the status of schools and districts. Parents **have** the right to know if their child is being taught by a *highly qualified* teacher.
5. Scientifically-based research. School systems **are required** to use *scientifically based research* strategies in classrooms and for professional development of staff.
6. Public school choice. If a school is identified as needing improvement, the school administrators **are required** to provide students with the opportunity to take advantage of public school choice (NCLB, 2006).