

UNIT 8: TENSE SHIFTS ACROSS IMRDC SECTIONS

Psychology Corpus: Tense Analysis (231 articles; 1,608,183 words)

OVERVIEW

Tense indicates your relationship to the information you are presenting. Each tense carries a meaning: present tense says “this is established knowledge”; past tense says “this was done or found”; present perfect says “research has accumulated”; modal verbs say “this might be the case.” These meanings shift systematically across the IMRDC sections, creating a tense arc that tracks the paper’s argumentative movement from established knowledge to new findings to cautious interpretation.

The arc is clear. Past tense dominates the Method and Results, where writers report completed actions and specific findings. Present tense rises through the Discussion and peaks in the Conclusion, where writers make generalised claims about what is true. Modals climb steadily from almost nothing in the Method to their highest point in the Conclusion, tracking the growing interpretive and speculative demands of later sections.

THE TENSE ARC

Past tense rises, then falls. It peaks in the Method, where nearly three-quarters of tense markers are past tense, describing completed procedures. It stays high in the Results for reporting specific findings, then drops sharply in the Discussion and Conclusion. This trajectory tracks the movement from concrete completed actions to abstract generalised claims.

Present tense falls, then rises. It begins moderate in the Introduction, drops to its lowest point in the Method, then climbs through the Discussion to its peak in the Conclusion, where it accounts for roughly three in five tense markers. Present tense dominates wherever writers are making claims about what is generally true rather than what was specifically found.

Modals climb steadily. From almost absent in the Method, through moderate in the Introduction, to prominent in the Discussion and Conclusion. This steady increase tracks the growing interpretive demands of later sections. The more a writer moves from data to meaning, the more hedging is required.

BEFORE YOU CHECK: THINKING ABOUT TENSE AS MEANING

Before checking the section-by-section patterns below, think about each sentence you write in terms of this question: What is the status of this information?

A QUICK SELF-DIAGNOSIS

Take a paragraph from the section you are currently writing and underline every verb. Then ask:

Am I describing what the world is like? → Present simple (“Attachment theory predicts...”). Use this when stating established facts, referring to tables and figures, or making general claims.

Am I reporting what others have collectively found? → Present perfect (“Studies have shown...”). Use this when summarising accumulated research; it connects the past to the present moment.

Am I reporting what I did or what I found? → Past simple (“We recruited...” “The analysis revealed...”). Use this for completed actions in your own study.

Am I interpreting what something might mean? → Modal (“This may suggest...” “Future research should...”). Use this when speculating, recommending, or projecting.

SECTION-BY-SECTION TENSE PATTERNS WITH CORPUS EXAMPLES

INTRODUCTION: A MIX OF PAST AND PRESENT

The Introduction uses a mix of tenses because it does two things

simultaneously: it summarises prior research (past and present perfect) and it states established knowledge (present). Past tense dominates overall because psychology introductions are literature-heavy: writers cite specific studies and report what those studies found. But present tense appears whenever writers step back to make general claims about a topic's importance or theoretical standing.

Past tense: citing specific findings:

Williams (2000) found that the ability to 'read the game' distinguishes skilled from less skilled players.

Faubert (2013) revealed striking superior skills in professional athletes compared to sub-elites and novices.

Present perfect: accumulated research:

Recent neurological evidence has demonstrated the role of 3D-MOT in enhancing cognitive function in healthy young adults.

Studies have shown that the presence of an adult passenger reduces crash risks.

Several studies have suggested that the prevalence of acquiescence differs across countries and depends on cultural orientations.

Present tense: established knowledge:

Attachment theory predicts that individuals with secure attachment models are better able to regulate their emotions.

Body dissatisfaction is the primary risk factor for the development of eating disorders.

Writer's note: The present perfect (*has shown, have found, have demonstrated*) peaks in the Introduction because this is where writers summarise what the research community has collectively established. It connects past findings to the present moment: "research has shown" implies the finding still holds. By contrast, "Smith (2005) showed" places the finding in the past without implying current relevance. This is a subtle distinction. One way to think about it is to present perfect for findings you treat as still valid; simple past for findings you are about to challenge or qualify. The choice of verb comes into play here. For instance, *show* in *have shown* generally fits well with present

perfect because the current relevance is clear. On the other hand, *find* may fit more easily with the past tense. “Smith (2005) found ...” Smith’s study occurred in the past; it is not continuing to the present time.

Your choice of tense depends on whether you are focussing on current relevance or a completed event or study.

METHOD: PAST TENSE DOMINATES

The Method section is dominated by past tense because it describes completed actions. Both passive (“were recruited”) and active (“we recruited”) forms appear, but passive past is far more common: roughly five to six times more frequent. This use foregrounds the procedure over the researcher. Note that in the following examples, there is no “by phrase”. The agent is understood to be the researcher,

Past passive: the dominant voice:

Participants were recruited from the University College London Psychology participant pool.

Participants were instructed to observe the videos and were reminded of this instruction verbally every 10 trials.

Ethical approval was granted by the local ethics committee.

Past active: less common but acceptable:

We recorded decision-making accuracy during small-sided games.

We estimated linear mixed models of children’s behaviour.

Present tense: describing instruments:

The scale consists of 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

The task requires participants to track multiple objects moving simultaneously.

Writer’s note: The present tense appears in the Method section when writers describe instruments, scales, or tasks that still exist. “The scale consists of 20 items” uses present tense because the scale still consists of 20 items. “Participants were asked to rate each item”

uses past tense because that action is finished. As a guideline, you can say the instrument is present; the use of it is past.

RESULTS: PAST TENSE FOR FINDINGS, PRESENT TENSE FOR DATA DISPLAYS

The Results section uses past tense to report specific findings and present tense to reference tables, figures, and data displays. This creates a characteristic tense split within individual Results sentences that is highly consistent across the corpus. Again, the choice of verb is relevant.

Past tense: reporting findings:

Results revealed a significant main effect of experimental condition, $F(5, 582) = 6.12, p < .001$.

The analysis showed that participants in the experimental condition scored significantly higher than controls.

There was no significant main effect of condition, $F(1, 47) = 0.28, p = .60$.

Present tense: referencing data displays:

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the behavioural data.

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction between condition and time.

Writer's note: The Results tense split is functionally motivated: past tense reports what happened in the study (completed events), while present tense refers to tables and figures that are permanently available to the reader. "The analysis showed" is past because the analysis is finished. "Table 1 shows" is present because the table is still there on the page. This split is quite consistent and conventional.

DISCUSSION: THE INTERPRETIVE SHIFT

The Discussion marks a dramatic shift in the tense profile. Past tense drops sharply; the occurrence of present tense and modal verbs rises significantly. This reflects the section's core function: moving from data to meaning.

Present tense: stating what findings mean:

Our findings suggest that condition plays an important role in shaping performance outcomes.

This finding is consistent with previous research showing that older adults tend to perform better on vocabulary measures.

Modal hedging: speculating cautiously:

The 3D-MOT technique could play a crucial role in improving passing accuracy in elite soccer players and could be implemented in training centres.

This result might be particularly interesting to employers who are looking to employ conscientious workers.

These findings could be applied in work on authentication, identification or pre-screening

Past tense: restating specific findings:

We found that vocabulary was more strongly associated with global coherence inferences.

Present perfect: connecting to the literature:

Previous studies have reported similar patterns in adult populations.

Writer's note: The Discussion's modal verb density is nearly double the Introduction's and nearly triple the Results'. This is the most important tense shift in the paper: it signals the move from reporting to interpreting. A Discussion that uses past tense without modals reads as overclaiming; a Discussion that uses only modals reads as evasive. The skill is in the balance: restate findings in past tense, interpret them with present tense and modals. The present reporting verb suggest is the signature of this shift: it appears far more frequently in the Discussion than in any other section.

CONCLUSION: THE GENERALISATION PEAK

The Conclusion shows the most extreme tense profile: present tense dominates, accounting for roughly three in five tense markers; past tense drops to its lowest point across the entire paper; and modals

peak. This reflects the Conclusion's function as the site of the paper's broadest, most generalised claims.

Present tense: generalised claims:

The present findings show that AAN is an early neural correlate of awareness in hearing, similar to VAN in vision.

In a companion paper, we demonstrate how communication facilitates long-term changes in generative models.

Modal: future-looking recommendations:

Future laboratory and in-field studies will be needed to evaluate the degree of transferability.

Adaptations to custody procedures and greater provision of accessible information are crucial as a lack of understanding can exacerbate anxiety levels.

Writer's note: The Conclusion's present-tense dominance is the mirror image of the Method's past-tense dominance. The Method says "this is what we did"; the Conclusion says "this is what is true." The tense shift from past to present across the paper tracks the transformation of specific procedures and findings into generalised knowledge claims. If your Conclusion is still in past tense, you have not yet made the rhetorical transition from reporting to claiming.

ABSTRACT: THE PAPER IN MINIATURE

The Abstract compresses the entire paper into roughly 170 words, and its tense profile reflects this compression. Past tense dominates overall (about 55% of tense markers), because the Abstract must report both what was done (Method) and what was found (Results). Present tense accounts for roughly a third, appearing when writers set the context ("Attention is a key factor in...") or state the significance of findings. Modals are modest: lower than in the Discussion or Conclusion: because the Abstract has little room for extended interpretation.

As noted in the previous unit, the Abstract's distinctive feature is that it cycles through tenses in a compressed version of the full paper's

arc. A typical Abstract moves from present tense (context) to past tense (method and findings) to present or modal (implications): all within a single paragraph. This micro-arc mirrors the macro-arc of the paper itself.

Disrupted sleep is a transdiagnostic factor characterising a multitude of psychiatric conditions. Although this is well-recognised, the cause of poor sleep across conditions is unclear.

We found that personality does, to some extent, predict choices regarding profile images; however, not always in the direction we predicted.

VOICE: PASSIVE VS ACTIVE ACROSS SECTIONS

Psychology has a reputation for heavy passive voice, and the corpus confirms this: but the distribution is uneven. Past passive constructions (*was/were* + past participle) are strongly concentrated in the Method, where they foreground the procedure over the researcher. By the Discussion and Conclusion, passive constructions are much less common, and present-tense active constructions take over.

In the Method, passive past outnumbers active past by roughly five or six to one. In the Results, the ratio narrows to about three to one. By the Discussion, passive constructions drop substantially, and present reporting verbs (*suggests, indicates, shows*) become the dominant verb form. In the Conclusion, passive voice is rare; present reporting verbs peak.

Writer's note: APA style permits active voice, and some journals encourage it. But the corpus shows that past passive remains the default in psychology Method and Results sections. Use passive when the procedure matters more than who performed it (“Participants were tested individually”); use active when agency matters (“We chose this instrument because...”). The Discussion and Conclusion naturally favour active voice because they foreground the writer’s interpretation, not the procedure.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING

Use tense as a diagnostic. If your Method section contains present tense verbs (“participants complete the task”), change them to past (“participants completed the task”). If your Discussion lacks modals, add them: you are almost certainly overclaiming.

Let the tense arc guide your revisions. The paper should feel like a journey from past to present: Method and Results are anchored in completed events; Discussion and Conclusion project findings into present-tense claims and future-oriented recommendations. If the tense feels flat across sections, your rhetorical transitions are not working.

Reserve present perfect for the Introduction. “Studies have shown” signals cumulative knowledge and belongs in the literature review. It drops sharply after the Introduction. Using present perfect in the Results (“the analysis has shown”) is unusual and slightly awkward; prefer simple past (“the analysis showed”).

Match voice to section. Passive voice is the natural default for Method and Results (foregrounding procedures and findings). Active voice becomes more natural in the Discussion and Conclusion (foregrounding interpretation). Mixing voices within a section is fine; the key is that the dominant voice matches the section’s rhetorical purpose.

As we said, the instrument is present; the use of it is past. When describing a scale, task, or measure in the Method section, use present tense for its properties (“The scale consists of 20 items”) and past tense for what you did with it (“Participants were asked to rate each item”).

The transition from Results to Discussion should be noticeable. The most reliable signal that interpretation has begun is the appearance of modals (*may*, *might*, *could*) and present-tense reporting verbs (*suggests*, *indicates*). If your Discussion reads like a continuation of the Results, check whether you have made the tense shift.