VERBS!

The following is adapted with permission from the work of some marvelous colleagues.

**Part One: Active vs. Passive Verbs**

Active voice describes a sentence where the subject performs the action stated by the verb.  In passive voice sentences, the subject is acted upon by the verb.

* + Harry ate six shrimp at dinner. (active)
  + At dinner, six shrimp were eaten by Harry. (passive)
  + Beautiful giraffes roam the savannah. (active)
  + The savannah is roamed by beautiful giraffes. (passive)
  + Sue changed the flat tire. (active)
  + The flat tire was changed by Sue. (passive)

When deciding between active and passive voice, keep in mind that passive voice is useful when you want to hide the actor (“The vase was broken!” rather than “I broke the vase.”), or when you’re writing up something like a lab report in the hard sciences (“Fifteen milliliters of the solution was then poured into the beaker.”). People often choose active voice for clarity and interest.

**Part Two: Verb Tense**

**General guideline**: Do not shift from one tense to another if the time frame for each action or state is the same.

* + 1. The instructor **explains** the diagram to students who **asked** questions during the lecture.
  + **CORRECTED:** The instructor **explains** the diagram to students who **ask** questions during the lecture.
  + 2. About noon the sky **darkened**, a breeze **sprang up**, and a low rumble **announces** the approaching storm.
  + **CORRECTED:**
  + 3. Yesterday we **walk** to school but later **rode** the bus home.
  + **CORRECTED:**

**General guideline:** Do shift tense to indicate a change in time frame from one action or state to another.

* + 1. The children **love** their new tree house, which they **built** themselves.
  + 2. Before they even **began** deliberations, many jury members **had reached** a verdict.
  + 3. Workers **are installing** extra loudspeakers because the music in tonight's concert **will need** amplification.

**General guideline:** Establish a primary tense for the main discourse, and use occasional shifts to other tenses to indicate changes in time frame.

* + Use **present tense** to state facts, to refer to perpetual or habitual actions, and to discuss your own ideas or those expressed by an author in a particular work. Also use present tense to describe action in a literary work, movie, or other fictional narrative.

**Part Three: Matching Tenses When Using Quotations**

As mentioned above, you should not switch tenses if the time frame of the action or state is the same. This is true even if you are inserting a quotation that uses verbs in a different tense than the rest of your sentence. Tenses should match, even when you’re quoting something.

**When writers insert or alter words in a direct quotation, square brackets—[ ]—are placed around the change. The brackets, always used in pairs, enclose words intended to clarify meaning, provide a brief explanation, or to help integrate the quote into the writer’s sentence.**

***A word of caution****: Bracketed insertions may not be used to alter or add to the quotation in a way that inaccurately or unfairly represents the original text. Quite simply, do not use bracketed material in a way that twists the author’s meaning.*

Example

Original quote: “It may seem excessive to imply, as James does, that Shakespearean zealots actually enjoyed a sort of evangelical relationship with him, or that doubters underwent the kind of faith crises that we believe many Victorian clergy did in the wake of the higher criticism” (LaPorte 623).

My sentence: Charles LaPorte claims that James “[implies]…that Shakespearean zealots actually enjoyed a sort of evangelical relationship with him” (623).

In the above example, I put “implies” in brackets to explain to the reader that I changed something about that word—in this case, I changed it to “implies” rather than “to imply” so as to maintain the verb tenses of my sentence.

The following excerpt is from Hamlet.

Hamlet was written by Shakespeare. (Passive)

Shakespeare wrote Hamlet. (Active)

**Ghost**

I am thy father's spirit,  
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid  
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,  
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,  
Thy knotted and combined locks to part  
And each particular hair to stand on end,  
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine:  
But this eternal blazon must not be  
To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, O, list!  
If thou didst ever thy dear father love--

**HAMLET**

O God!

**Ghost**

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

In small groups, take 3-5 minutes to discuss the following:

Group One: Identify a place (or places) where the ghost uses parallel structure. What’s the effect of that parallel structure? **(Be prepared to share with the whole group)**

Group Two: Identify the kinds of punctuation used in this section. Where you find something other than a comma or a period, discuss why that punctuation is used. What does the punctuation signal to the reader (in this case, the actor)? **(Be prepared to share with the whole group.)**

Group Three: Identify long and short sentences. Which sentences are particularly short? Why? What strikes you as particularly long? Why might that sentence be so long? **(Be prepared to share with the whole group)**

As a whole group, identify the verbs in this passage (there are a lot of them!). Discuss the effect of using so many active verbs.

As a whole group, look at the first sentence of the passage. At what point does the tense of the verbs change? Why?