Verb Tense Shift

Verbs have tense forms which indicate different times: present, for actions occurring now; past, for actions completed in the past; and future, for actions that will occur in the future. Tense is crucial to our understanding of when actions occur. The verb tense within a sentence or a related group of sentences should not shift without good reason.

No: One night, I was driving late. Suddenly I see a possum in the path of my Humvee. I slam on my brakes and barely avoid hitting it. (shift from past to present tense)

Yes: One night I was driving late. Suddenly I saw a possum in the path of my Humvee. I slammed on my brakes and barely avoided hitting it. (all past tense verbs)

- **Remember:**
  
  1. Do not shift from present tense to past tense within a sentence without good reason.

No: Madonna nets a cool $60 million over seven years while the average teacher earned $34,413 a year.
Yes: Madonna nets a cool $60 million over seven years while the average teacher earns $34,413 a year.

  2. Do not shift from past tense to present tense within a sentence without good reason.

No: The judge told John that His Honor would not release John unless he promises to undergo therapy for anger management.
Yes: The judge told John that His Honor would not release John unless he promised to undergo therapy for anger management.

  3. Sometimes the context of a sentence requires a change in tense in one or more of the clauses.

Ex: Because the rabbit test died out in the fifties, many women today who suspect they are pregnant resort to over-the-counter, instant-result pregnancy tests. (necessary change from past tense to present tense)
Ex: *The Wizard of Oz* is a film that has enchanted audiences since it was made in 1939. (necessary shifts from present tense to present perfect tense to past tense)

**Present Tense**

Use the present tense when writing about art and when expressing general truths.

No: Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* was about bullfighting.
Yes: Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* is about bullfighting.

No: According to Galileo, the earth *revolved* around the sun.
Yes: According to Galileo, earth *revolves* around the sun.

❖ **Perfect Tenses**

A verb in one of the perfect tenses (a form of *have* plus the past participle) generally expresses an action that was or will be completed at the time of another action.

1. **Present perfect tense** indicates action completed in the past and continuing into the present.
   Ex: The rain *has fallen* in sheets all day long.

2. **Past perfect tense** indicates action completed in the past before another past action.
   Ex: She *had asked* the tutor for help before she turned to me.

3. **Future perfect tense** indicates action that will be completed before some time in the future.
   Ex: Lake Louise *will have died* before the county commission acts next month.

NOTE: If the main verb involves a *perfect* tense (*have, has, had*), do not repeat this verb form in other parts of the sentence; instead, use the simple past tense in the other parts of the sentence.

No: Opponents *have predicted* disaster ever since the first nuclear power plants *have been built*.
Yes: Opponents *have predicted* disaster ever since the first nuclear power plants *were built*.