

3.03 Talking about the present

There are two main tenses which are used to talk about present time:

PRESENT SIMPLE: *I work; it rains; do they want?* etc.

PRESENT PROGRESSIVE: *He is working; it is raining; are you coming?* etc. (also called Present Continuous)

The two tenses are normally not interchangeable. Apart from some infrequent or special uses, they are used as follows:

PRESENT SIMPLE is used to talk about:

permanent states

The town lies on the River Severn. Where do you come from?

habitual actions

I always have dinner at 8 o'clock. It never snows in the summer.

PRESENT PROGRESSIVE is used to talk about:

temporary states

Because the canteen's closed for a week, we're having lunch in the office.

actions or situations happening now or "around now"

Sorry, you can't speak to her. She's having a shower.

Birmingham is preparing for next month's summit meeting.

The climate is gradually getting warmer.

In written academic assignments, it is unlikely that you will need to use the present progressive very often: the present simple (or other tenses) will be more frequent.

Special uses of the present tenses

Present simple

Referencing

The present simple is the best tense to use when you are introducing information from a source. Even though your source material was written in the past, it is there in front of you on paper or on the screen now. So:

*Lara (2017) **discusses** the psychology of captaincy ... Another view is **postulated** by Graveney (2016), who argues that ...*

Referring to data

Similarly, you should use the present simple (active or passive) when referring to data in your writing:

*Figure 2 **shows** the differences ... The relationship **is expressed** in Figure 3.*

[You can find more useful vocabulary in the Manchester Phrasebank](#)

Talking about the future

The present simple is often used in 'subordinate clauses' to refer to the future, very often after words such as if, when, after, while, until etc:

*The regulations will stay in force until a new law **is** passed. If the truth **comes** out, the committee will have to resign.*

The present simple is also used to refer to the future in the context of 'fixed' times such as timetables, schedules, agenda etc

*My plane **leaves** at 10 tomorrow morning. The contract **finishes** next September.*

Instructions and processes

The simple present is the verb usually used in giving instructions or explaining processes:

*First, **detach** the cover and **connect** the power supply lead. The water **enters** through a fine filter and **is** then channelled to the tank.*

Present progressive

Verbs without present progressive form

Some verbs are never, or rarely, found in the progressive form, even when they refer to 'now'. A group of these verbs are sometimes referred to as 'stative' verbs, as they describe mental or emotional states rather than actions (eg know, love etc):

*I **know** more now than I did at the beginning of the year. (NOT I am knowing)*

Some verbs are found in the progressive form only when they have a certain meaning. For example, **think** can refer to what going on in your head:

*What are you **thinking** about? You look worried.*

But it can also mean 'have an opinion', in which case it is **not** used in the progressive form:

*I now **think** that Macs are far superior to PCs.*

Talking about the future

The present progressive is often used to talk about **plans** in the future:

*What **are you doing** tonight? We're **staying** at home this summer and **redecorating**.*

Expressing annoyance at repeated actions

Although repeated or habitual actions would usually be expressed with the present simple (I always play squash on Saturday afternoon), the present progressive can sometimes be used in more informal English to show disapproval of a repeated action which is annoying:

*You're always **interrupting** me when I start to speak. I wish you wouldn't.*

Exercise on present tenses

Put the verb in brackets into the correct form of the present. Be careful with singular/plurals and active/passives.

- 1 This essay _____ (*analyse*) the arguments in favour of inflationary pressure on the economy.
- 2 Although they are members of the English team, both players _____ (*come*) from South Africa.
- 3 The river _____ (*run*) from North to South and _____ (*join*) the sea near Bristol.
- 4 Because of all the heavy rain recently, the river _____ (*run*) exceptionally high.
- 5 Before leaving the factory, all products _____ (*examine*) closely for defects.
- 6 Diversions have been set up near the university this week as Aldridge Road _____ (*resurface*).
- 7 Table 3a _____ (*show*) the most recent figures available.
- 8 The results of the experiment _____ (*show*) in Fig. 8
- 9 We usually _____ (*go*) to Portugal for our holidays.
- 10 I think I _____ (*understand*) the process more clearly now.
- 11 It is said that the European and North American land masses _____ (*drift*) together, albeit very, very slowly.
- 12 Classes always _____ (*finish*) at the end of May.
- 13 The process is extremely simple. Applicants _____ (*send*) their forms to a central office, and these _____ (*sort*) according to age and experience.
- 14 That's the end of the exercise. I _____ (*hope*) things are a little clearer now.

Exercise on present tenses - Answers

- 1 This essay **ANALYSES** the arguments in favour of inflationary pressure on the economy.
- 2 Although they are members of the English team, both players **COME** from South Africa.
- 3 The river **RUNS** from North to South and **JOINS** the sea near Bristol.
- 4 Because of all the heavy rain recently, the river **IS RUNNING** exceptionally high.
- 5 Before leaving the factory, all products **ARE EXAMINED** closely for defects.
- 6 Diversions have been set up near the university this week as Aldridge Road **IS BEING RESURFACED**.
- 7 Table 3a **SHOWS** the most recent figures available.
- 8 The results of the experiment **ARE SHOWN** in Fig. 8.
- 9 We usually **GO** to Portugal for our holidays.
- 10 I think I **UNDERSTAND** the process more clearly now.
- 11 It is said that the European and North American land masses **ARE DRIFTING** together, albeit very, very slowly.
- 12 Classes always **FINISH** at the end of May.
- 13 The process is extremely simple. Applicants **SEND** their forms to a central office, and these **ARE SORTED** according to age and experience.
- 14 That's the end of the exercise. I **HOPE** things are a little clearer now.