

Tense use in academic writing...for writing about research

This is a summary of some of the more common uses of tense in academic writing, in particular in writing up research. Are these used in your discipline – all the time? some of the time? never?

Introductions & Literature Reviews		
Purpose	Tense	Example
To report facts / truths	Present	<p>Demand for power at different charging locations varies over time (Matthew et al., 2017; Xiang et al., 2019).</p> <p>Social attraction is a type of sensory-based conservation, and is a common management tool used worldwide for the establishment of seabird breeding colonies (Arnold et al., 2011; Jones & Kress, 2012).</p>
To report historical facts	Past	<p>Drive tourism was also instrumental in the early historical popularity of cars, and of combustion cars in particular (Bladh, 2019; Ivory & Genus, 2010; Sovacool, 2009).</p> <p>Between 2008 and 2020, only 3,600 hectares of native forest were afforested and included in the New Zealand Emissions Trading Scheme (Chartres et al., 2020).</p>
To make general statements about previous research, or summarise previous research by several researchers	Present perfect	<p>Several international studies have focused on ...</p> <p>Social attractants have primarily been used in the establishment or re-establishment of permanent colonies.</p> <p>Past trials of social attractants in black-fronted terns have demonstrated positive yet inconclusive results due to inadequate observations or equipment (Anderson et al., 2007; Steffens, 2008).</p>
To report results of one specific study	Past	<p>Bergin & Kimberley (2014) found that regeneration of totara (<i>Podocarpus totara</i>) in the presence of grazing was more prevalent on steeper slopes ...</p> <p>Decoys and audio playback were used to attract ... The attractants facilitated the establishment of a colony of thirty-two least terns ...</p>
To introduce a new area or researcher (before going on to report/discuss a specific study) (* less common in sciences)	Present perfect	<p>Caruthers and Wilson (2017) have demonstrated that deep understanding of new information is determined by ... They surveyed ...</p>
To report an original author's opinion (* This is an alternative way of reporting, and less common in sciences)	Present	<p>Halldén's (1991) research claims that working class parents are more likely to ...</p> <p>Lareau (2011) argues that the middle classes place great importance on ...</p> <p>Bladh (2019) draws a distinction between ...</p>
To state the purpose of your paper	Present or past	<p>The study aimed / aims to determine ...</p> <p>The study reported here was conducted to investigate..</p> <p>This study investigates ... Secondly, we consider ...</p>

Materials & Methods		
Purpose	Tense	Example
For general population	Present	All students <u>sit</u> an examination before entering the course.
For sample	Past	The participants <u>were</u> students enrolled in ...
For conventional material familiar to reader	Present	IELTS <u>tests</u> receptive and productive levels of English.
For specifically designed materials	Past	The XXX model in this study <u>was</u> designed to test ...
For method	Past	Surveys <u>were</u> distributed to ... Eight hundred and twenty five specimens <u>were</u> collected over three sampling periods.
	Past perfect	Follow-up interviews were carried out with ten of the respondents who <u>had completed</u> a survey form in Stage 1 of the research.
Results		
For specific findings	Past	Three of the six variables <u>were identified</u> as significant predictors in ... The percentage of total interactions during the first observation session ... <u>ranged</u> from 0% in the Hopkins, Potts, Upper and Lower Waimakariri, to 86% in ...
Discussion		
To refer back to hypothesis or purpose	Past	The aim <u>was</u> to compare ...
To restate findings, explain findings	Past	Natural regeneration of woody vegetation <u>was</u> unevenly distributed ... The sample size <u>was</u> very small. It <u>was</u> possible that ...
To discuss previous research	Past, or Present perfect	<i>(You will have to refer to previous literature in the discussion; see p.1 on introductions and literature reviews for examples of tense use.)</i>
To compare your findings with others' findings	Present	This finding <u>is</u> consistent with other published literature. These observations <u>contrast</u> with the more generally accepted view of ... The 72.5% emergence <u>is</u> higher than the range reported by ...
To introduce implications	Present	It <u>appears</u> that ... The findings <u>indicate</u> that ...

Some examples above have been adapted from:

Apse, M. (2019). *Parents' discursive accounts of their children's participation in rugby league* [Masters Thesis, Lincoln University]. Research@Lincoln. <https://hdl.handle.net/10182/10812>

Fitt, H. (2022). Boring and inadequate? A literature review considering the use of electric vehicles in drive tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 25 (12), 1920-1946. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1937074>

Hamblin, C. (2017). *Colony dynamics and social attraction in black-fronted terns, Chlidonias albastratus* [Masters Thesis, Lincoln University]. Research@Lincoln. <https://hdl.handle.net/10182/8796>

Pedley, D. (2022). *Natural regeneration of woody vegetation in pastoral hill country: A case study of Oashore Station, Banks Peninsula* [Masters Thesis, Lincoln University]. Research@Lincoln. <https://hdl.handle.net/10182/15025>

If you would like to know more about using different tenses,
talk to one of the Learning Advisors in Academic Success (academicsuccess@lincoln.ac.nz)