

## Avoiding Unnecessary Shifts

(From: Kirzner & Mandell. "Patterns for College Writing". 12th Ed. 2011. Bedford St. Martin.)

To explain a process to readers, you need to use **consistent verb tense** (past or present), **person** (first, second, or third), **voice** (active or passive), and **mood** (statements or commands). *Unnecessary shifts in tense, person, voice, or mood can confuse readers and make it difficult for them to follow your process.*

### 1. Avoiding Shifts in Tense:

-> Use **present tense** for a process that is **performed regularly**.

"The body is first laid out in the undertaker's morgue — or rather, Mr. Jones is reposing in the preparation room — to be readied to bid the world farewell" (Mitford 304).

-> Use **past tense** for a process that was performed in the **past**.

"He peeled the potatoes and thin sliced them into a quart-sized Mason fruit jar" (Malcolm X 281).

### Shift from present to past tense only when you need to indicate a change in time:

"Usually, I study several days before a test, but this time I studied the night before."

## 2. Avoiding Shifts in Person

-> In process explanations, use first or third person.

First Person (I): “I reached for the box of Medium Ash Brown hair color just as my friend Veronica grabbed the box labeled Sparkling Sherry” (Hunt 275).

First Person (we): “We decided to use my bathroom to color our hair” (Hunt 275).

Third Person (he): “The embalmer, having allowed an appropriate interval to elapse, returns to the attack, but now he brings into play the skill and equipment of sculptor and cosmetician” (Mitford 306).

-> In instructions, use second person.

Second Person (you): “If you sometimes forget to pay bills, or if you have large student loans, you may have a problem” (McGlade 270).

**When you give instructions, be careful not to shift from third to second person.**

Incorrect: If **a person** sometimes forgets to pay bills, or if **someone** has large student loans, you may have a problem. (shift from third to second person)

Correct: If **you** sometimes forget to pay bills, or if **you** have large student loans, **you** may have a problem. (second person used consistently)

### 3. Avoiding Shifts in Voice

Use **active voice** when you want to emphasize *the person* performing the action.

“In the last four years, **I** have moved eight times, living in three dorm rooms, two summer sublets, and three apartments in three different cities.” (McGlade 270).

Use passive voice to emphasize *the action* itself (or then receiver of the action), not the person performing it.

“The patching and filling completed, Mr. Jones is now shaved, washed, and dressed” (Mitford 307).

**Do not shift between the active and the passive voice, especially within a sentence, unless your intent is to change your emphasis.**

Incorrect: The first draft of my essay was completed, and then **I started** the second draft. (shift from passive to **active** voice)

Correct: **I completed** the first draft of my essay, and then **I started** the second draft. (**active voice** used consistently)

#### 4. Avoiding Shifts in Mood

Use the indicative mood (statements) for process explanations.

“He draped the towel around my shoulders, over my rubber apron, and began again vaselining my hair” (Malcolm X 282).

Use the imperative mood (**commands**) only in **instructions**.

“Turn the crate upside down” (Piven et al. 291).

**Be careful not to shift from the imperative mood to the indicative mood.**

*Incorrect:* First, check your credit report for errors, and **you** should report any errors you find. (shift from imperative to **indicative** mood)

*Correct:* First, check your credit report for errors, and report any errors you find. (imperative mood used consistently)

*Correct:* First, **you** should check your credit report for errors, and **you** should report any errors you find. (**indicative** mood used consistently)