



## The Writing Center at Bristol Community College

Building B - Room 117  
508-678- 2811 X2544

E-mail: [writing.center@bristolcc.edu](mailto:writing.center@bristolcc.edu)  
Website: [www.bristolcc.edu/writingcenter](http://www.bristolcc.edu/writingcenter)

### What do I need to know about verb tenses, subject/verb agreement?

#### Understanding verb tenses

Among the most common errors of grammar (by both native and non-native speakers/writers in English) is an **inconsistent use of verb tenses**. The issue is more than grammatical since it goes to the logical or temporal connection between or among events—in other words, to the meaning that we intend to convey:

- The car came to a screeching halt, after the accident. A man comes out of the car that had been hit and began to shout at the driver who hits him.

We assume that this incident has already occurred (with the verb “came” in the past tense). But note the use of the present tense with the verb “comes” and then the past perfect with “had been hit” and, finally, with the present tense in “hits.” The sentences should have been written this way:

- The car came to a screeching halt after the accident. A man came out of the car that had been hit and began to shout at the driver who had hit him.

Note that the **past perfect tenses** suggest actions that preceded the one described (the car “had been hit” before these subsequent actions occurred). Of course the passage could also be written this way:

- The car comes to a screeching halt after the accident. A man comes out of the car and begins to shout at the driver who hit him.

If your intention is to present the accident as it occurred (from eye-witness testimony) then you might very well stay with the present tense. So much, in other words, depends on your own intentions as writer.

#### Making subjects and verbs agree

The adroit use of grammar and mechanics enhances both intention and control over language for a writer. Notice the lack of control and perhaps even a blurring of the writer’s intention in this grammar error:

- One of the students in my literature class know more about Victorian England than even the teacher does.

The subject of the sentence, the singular “One,” requires a singular form of the verb, “knows.” Subjects and verbs must **agree in number** (plural or singular). Unfortunately, the writer has used the plural “know” instead of the singular. The question then becomes, Just how many knew more than the teacher? Of course, the reason for such an error is simple enough: the writer had mistaken “students” as the subject of the sentence rather than “One.” Just what does the writer intend?