

Tense and voice in medical writing

by Valerie A. Elliston

As we know, the verb is the most important part of speech. (*Verbum = the word.*)

Its tense can tell us the **time** of the action (past, present or future) and the state of **completeness**, whether finished ('perfect') or continuing ('continuous' or 'progressive'). Within these simple categories are several more detailed situations, but the purpose of this article is to concentrate on those most important in medical writing. We will look at examples of tense and voice in everyday language before noting what differences or subtleties are involved when applied to medical usage.

Does this really matter? Yes: science depends on clear thinking and precise reporting.

Present simple tense

The last statement above is a sentence in the present simple tense because it is a simple statement of a fact that exists in the present time, even more important in writing because the outcome becomes permanent and needs to be understood by all who read it. There is no help from tone of the spoken voice or body language. Therefore, the choice and arrangement of words are vital. Further examples of this use of the present simple are
Complex language impedes understanding.
Paris is the capital of France.
Her name is Anna.

In medical writing, the present simple is used in reference to stable conditions, generalizations, or facts already known and published, as in the following.

Hypogonadism is a feature of chronic renal failure. An accepted fact resulting from studies and publication.
The local hospital is on red alert. A known fact.
Jones shows a rate of relapse of 30% unless the injection is repeated. Referring to a publication by Jones.
Kidney damage occurs in a minority of patients and can be detected early by a urine test for albumin.
This test is used for the diagnosis of XYZ.
Several recent reports describe similar findings.

The simple present is also used when a method is being described for the first time for the purpose of instruction, but the remainder of the Methods and Results section of a paper is written in the past tense.

The pilot tube is attached to the airway by a T-connector.
At first, the patient lies in the prone position.
The surgeon inserts his finger into the atrium.

The testing strip is placed into the meter and gives a precise blood glucose reading.

The captions to illustrations, figures, graphs and tables are also written in the simple present, but comments are written in the past tense.

Figure 1. The arrow denotes an intervention which, after a latent period of 2 days, causes the variable to decrease.
Figure 10 shows measurements in appropriate units. It indicates adults by closed circles, children by open circles.
There were statistical differences between the periods.
Table 3 shows the glycaemic index of different foods.
The above illustration shows the principal features of the eye.

Note that the present simple tense indicates actions that are complete.

Present perfect tense

The present perfect tense refers to repeated events, or to a period of time that continues from the past to the present. The main verb is used in conjunction with the auxiliary verb 'have'. The action here is only just finished, and remains of current interest viewed from the perspective of present time.

He has written the essay. Very recently, only just finished.
She has left the country. Recently.
They have moved to a new house. Recently.

In medical writing,

Jones has reported that . . . indicates a paper published in the recent past and still of continuing importance.

A serious complication has occurred. An event in the recent past that is of continuing concern in the present.

There have been few reports of this disease among very young children. So far. There have been few within the recent past but there remains a possibility that the disease might occur again.

This drug has produced a significant rise in blood pressure. It still does.

This behaviour has occurred under different environmental conditions. It still does.

Present continuous

This tense indicates actions taking place right now, in the present.

They are studying this behaviour under different environmental conditions.

We are building a new orthopaedic unit at the local hospital.

Each is a statement of fact without any sense of the amount of time taken so far.

>>>

>>> **Tense and voice in medical writing****Present perfect continuous**

The present perfect continuous indicates actions commenced in the recent past but not yet completed; unlike the present perfect they are still continuing.

They have been studying this behaviour under different environmental conditions.

They have been doing this for some time, but have not yet finished the work.

We have been building a new orthopaedic unit at the local hospital. The work began recently, but is not yet finished.

They have been carrying out clinical studies on this condition. Not yet finished.

In each case, there is a sense of actions taking place over some time even though the exact period is not mentioned.

Simple past tense

The simple past tense indicates that the action was completed before the time of speaking or writing.

I lived in New York. He worked in London. She came to England. All simple, obvious facts completed at some time in the past and not specifically related to the present.

In medical writing, this tense is used to discuss results that cannot be generalized and relate only to a particular study. Note the important nuances of meaning in the following examples.

Jones (1990) reported that 35% of the insects in his study showed signs of parasitism.

(This result is specific to Jones's particular study.)

It is also used for unpublished results that will not become established knowledge until after publication, as in

In the study presented here, the drug killed 90% of the X bacilli, as Table 2 shows.

Note the difference between this use and the use of the simple present tense for established facts.

Jones reports that . . . (simple present) refers to a just-published paper of current interest.

Jones has reported that . . . (present perfect) indicates a paper published in the recent past and still of intellectual importance. The year is seldom mentioned when using this tense.

Jones reported that . . . (simple past) indicates a paper published some time in the past, a completed event. In contrast to the present perfect tense above, the year is usually mentioned as in

In 1990, Jones reported that . . .

Past continuous

The past continuous indicates a past action that was continuing when something else happened, as in

He was having a bath when the telephone rang.

Jones was writing the report when he suddenly realised . . .

The continuous here is contrasted with the simple past.

Past perfect

The past perfect tense indicates an event that occurred in the past but before another event that also occurred in the past. This tense involves the use of the auxiliary verb 'have' in its past tense: *had*.

He had lived in London for years before he came to Cornwall. First he lived in London, then he left there and went to live in Cornwall.

She had already conducted these experiments before we met. Her experiments were completed before we met.

Jones had reported . . . before some other report or event.

There follows naturally the past perfect continuous tense which again indicates an event that occurred in the past, but continued in relation to some other event, drawing attention to the two different time frames.

I had been taking a bath when the telephone rang.

The surgeon had been operating for an hour when the patient suddenly collapsed.

The drip had been working satisfactorily until the blockage occurred.

Active and passive voice

She made the incision. She (the subject of the sentence) did something.

The incision was made. Here, the incision (the subject of the sentence) did nothing. It remained passive; someone did something to it.

The boy ate the apple (active voice)

The apple was eaten by the boy (passive voice)

Use of the passive was once an established convention in scientific writing, but the active voice is now preferred unless otherwise stipulated. It produces clearer, more direct language. Common passive constructions in medical writing include

It was decided to . . . instead of *We decided to . . .*

Measurements were then taken instead of *We then took measurements.*

It was felt that . . . instead of *We felt that . . .*

Some writers feel that the passive voice sounds more modest and 'scientific', but the foremost aim should be for clarity and directness, avoiding superfluous words.

There are occasions, however, when the passive would be appropriate.

It can be used when the performer of the action is not as important as his or her office.

The president was honoured at the ceremony when . . . The office was being honoured rather than the individual.

It can also be used when the performer of the action is relatively unimportant, as in

All the patients were then weighed. Someone other than the writer weighed the patients.

The passive can also be used with a 'by phrase' when the performers of the action are multiple, as in

Tense and voice in medical writing

The idea has been put forward by the Royal College of Surgeons, the General Medical Council, The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the Royal College of Nursing. Use of the passive here makes for a smoother sentence rather than reading the long list of organizations as active subjects.

Finally, it might be useful to mention one construction that seems confusing whether spoken or written. (The speaker usually sounds hesitant and doubtful.) The asterisks indicate the incorrect sentences.

**I should have liked to have visited Rome.* This should be either

- (a) *I should have liked (last year) to visit Rome (but we didn't have time) or*
- (b) *I should like (now that I reflect on it) to have visited Rome (last year).*

The meaning is either:

- (a) While I was abroad I wanted to visit Rome but it wasn't possible. Or
- (b) I wish now that I had visited Rome but it wasn't possible.

In medical writing this construction could appear as, for example,

**We would have liked to have shown . . .* instead of
We would like (now) to have shown . . . or
We would have liked (then) to show . . .

Valerie A. Elliston

Colchester, UK

Valerie A. Elliston is a freelance writer and registered indexer. She was formerly an adult education lecturer in English language and literature.

So what is a 'native speaker'?

Bernadette Scalzo, a freelance colleague in France, sent the following question to the EMWA Freelance Email Discussion Forum:

Some job adverts for medical writers request English mother-tongue or native-speaker freelancers. Is there actually a legal basis for the term 'mother tongue' or 'native speaker'? The terms actually provide no information on the ability of the native speaker of English to write English well in our context.

I think it's worth throwing this question open to a larger audience than the freelance membership.

There is obviously no legal basis for the term 'native speaker' and never will be. We are all native speakers of something. I have always said that the fact that a person is a 'native *speaker*' of a language does not mean that they can *write* that language well. Much of the writing medical writers do these days in Europe and elsewhere has to be in English. There are plenty of people doing a great job as medical writers in English whose 'native language' is not English. And, of course, not only I see better 'writing' in English (in the sense of *composition* or *conceptual work*) from 'non-native' speakers of English than from some 'native speakers' of English. Being a native speaker of any language is definitely not a passport to being a good writer in that language. As a trainer in medical writing in English, the illustrious 'English native speaker' can be the bane of my life. Regular readers will know that many of the myths I try to explode are prefaced by the statement: "A native speaker of English told me

that there is a rule that . . .", and I can often find no basis for a 'rule' whatsoever!

The reason that Bernadette's question interested me was not just because of 'English'. I would like to invite all readers to send me their 'dictionary' definition (i.e. as short as possible) of the term 'native speaker'. Can it be defined? Can you be a 'native speaker' of two languages? Does it mean the language of the country you are born in and live in for the first few years of your life? Does it mean that you have to have learned the language from birth? What if the people who taught you a language from birth were not native speakers of the language of the country you live in, and you don't learn the country's language until pre-school or school, and always speak a different language at home?

Before answering, it would be worth checking out Lim Soo Hwee's article 'What is the definition of a native speaker of English' in a previous version of *TWS* [1]. She attended school in Singapore where her entire education was in English, and she says: 'Though I was born into a family that speaks Hokkien (a southern Chinese dialect), I am not fluent enough to carry on a decent conversation in this dialect with my elders'. Her article makes interesting reading.

Alistair Reeves

a.reeves@ascribe.de

Reference:

1. Hwee SL. What is the definition of a native speaker of English? *TWS* 2006;15(2):47