



# Grammar Girl: Too Tense



by  
**Deb Courtney-Bertha**

Dear Grammar Girl,

I am in college, and every time I turn a research paper in, I get it back with the word “tense” written all over it. Every professor I ask to explain this to me gives me an evil look, and suggests I get help. Are they all in a bad mood? If so, can I, as a paying student, withhold some of their salary until they get an attitude adjustment?

Carma,

Neirleigh University

Dear Carma,

Without having more information than provided in your brief letter, I can only surmise a few things for which I may be able to offer some assistance.

1. Have your name changed immediately. It is possible that your name itself is causing flashbacks to sit-ins and other anti-war related demonstrations in which it is almost a sure bet your professors participated (I would guess they also participated in a few things that might cause flashbacks without any assistance or prompting from you, but that is a matter for Law Enforcement, not the Grammar Police). I suggest something innocuous, such as Maisy, or Heather, Typhani, which will still confuse your professors, but in a much more acceptable fashion.

2. As to the word “tense” written on your papers...all I can really do is explain the Theory of linear Time. Some scientists have theorized that time is linear in nature, which is to say that it has a starting point, and events occur along it, each subsequent to the previous, progressing in an orderly fashion right up to the present, which means the actual instance in which you are now living. Like this one. No, this one. Well, this one is probably...well, this is about where the theory breaks down, but as I am merely a maven of grammar and not versed in things like The Existence of ParaSeconds in a Sub Quantum World, I shall leave that part up to the geeks. I mean scientists, of course.

What, you might ask, does the Theory of Linear Time have to do with “tense” being scrawled all over your papers? I’d really need to see the papers in question to give a specific answer, but I am thinking that you have either never learned the basics of Linear Time Theory, or have Gotten Them All Screwed Up.

In order to know which time-place along the linear continuum is being referenced by some third party (say,

the writers of your course materials, or by your professor), there are certain code words grammarians have all agreed to. When these code words are used properly, the time-place is clear, as long as you, too, can interpret a code (which is the topic of my next book, “The Sky is Falling: A Meta-linguistic Conversation Regarding The Mis- and Over-use of Seen in place of Saw, and the Para-quantum Ramifications Thereof,” co-authored by Steven Hawkings, available early 2002 at all major booksellers for \$29.95).

The code, to be more explicative, is a method by which we use any form of the infinitive “to be,” with or without an added infinitive conjugated so as to be complementary to the selected form of “to be.” (This, by the way, has nothing to do with Hamlet, though if infinitives are giving you trouble, please refer back to my column on infinitives published in these pages three months ago).

Thus, let us look at an example or two, to give a better idea. Take, for instance, the “to be” form “am,” such as in “I am.” If we add the word “insane,” we have the simplest construction possible, “this is that,” implying no action, but merely a state of events happening in the current instance on the time-place continuum.

Let’s complicate it a bit. “I am going insane.” Now, on the time place continuum, the first example suggests a status of events that has been completed at some time and still remains a constant. The second suggests an action which began sometime in the past, but which is not yet complete (i.e., I still have some sanity left). Tossing a new wrench in the works, let’s say “I went insane.” This clearly implies that in some time in the past, I began, went through, and finished the process known as going insane. There is some implication that I might still be insane, but is unclear to that point, and would require additional textual context to become defined.

Now, I could say (and many have), that, “I am going to go insane.” This is a much more complex sentence structure, implying that at some unspecified time I will lose my marbles, and continue to lose my marbles until I have no marbles left to speak of (though if anyone takes my Aggie, I’ll hunt them down.)

What is probably happening with your papers is that you haven’t got a clue as to how the code words give you a defined time-place relationship in the reader writer contract. I have given some simple applications above; I expect it is your poorly executed attempts to use more complex forms that is making your professors tense.

Or, it could be that they are underpaid, untenured ivory-tower academics who hate their jobs and think their time would be better spent writing monographs on “The Anti-Feminist Implications of the Word Justice, as found in Shakespeare, Dickens and Dave Barry,” in which case it’s no wonder they’re tense.

Yours in good grammar,

Grammar Girl



Deb Courtney-Bertha is the author of Grammar Girl and active in the writing community. Visit her website at <http://www.debcourtney.com>