



Language Focus: Citation and Tense

Tense choice in reviewing previous research is subtle and somewhat flexible. (It is also not very much like the “rules” you may have been taught in English classes.) The following, therefore, are only general guidelines for tense usage.

Several studies have shown that at least two-thirds of all citing statements fall into one of these three major patterns.

Pattern 1

Past—researcher activity as agent

Huang (2007) *investigated* the causes of airport delays.

The causes of airport delays *were investigated* by Huang (2007).

Pattern 2

Present Perfect—researcher activity not as agent

The causes of airport delays *have been* widely *investigated* (Hyon, 2004; Huang, 2007; Martinez et al., 2010).

There *have been* several investigations into the causes of airport delays (Hyon 2004; Huang, 2007; Martinez et al., 2010).

Several researchers *have studied* the causes of airport delays.¹⁻³

Pattern 3

Present—no reference to researcher activity

The causes of airport delays *are* complex (Hyon, 2004; Huang, 2007, Martinez et al., 2010).

Airport delays *appear to have* a complex set of causes.¹⁻³

Note the common uses of these patterns.

Pattern 1—reference to single studies—past

Pattern 2—reference to areas of inquiry—present perfect

Pattern 3—reference to state of current knowledge—present

Also note that in Patterns 1 and 2, attention is given to what previous researchers did, while in Pattern 3 the focus is on what has been found.

Finally, note that different areas of scholarship have somewhat different preferences. Patterns 1 and 2 are most common in the humanities and the

social sciences and least common in the areas of science, engineering, and medical research. However, all three patterns tend to occur in many extensive literature reviews since they add *variety* to the text.

We have said that these three patterns cover about two-thirds of the cases. The reason this proportion is not higher is because writers of literature reviews can have certain options in their choice of tenses. This is particularly true of Pattern 1. The main verbs in Pattern 1 can refer to what a previous researcher *did* (*investigated, studied, analyzed, etc.*). By and large, in these cases the past is obligatory. However, the main verbs can also refer to what the previous researcher *wrote* or *thought* (*stated, concluded, claimed, etc.*). With this kind of reporting verb (see Unit Five), tense options are possible.

Rogers (2004) *concluded* that business failure may be related to reduced working capital and retained earnings.

Rogers (2004) *has concluded* that

Rogers (2004) *concludes* that

The differences among these tenses are subtle. In general, moves from past to present perfect and then to present indicate that the research reported is increasingly *close* to the writer in some way: close to the writer's own opinion, close to the writer's own research, or close to the current state of knowledge.

The present tense choice is sometimes called the *citational present* and is also used with famous or important sources.

Aristotle argues that

Confucius says

The Bible says

The Constitution states

Comparable options exist in the subordinate clause.

Rogers (2004) found that business failure *was* correlated most closely with reduced working capital.

Rogers (2004) found that business failure *is* correlated most closely with reduced working capital.

The first sentence shows that the writer believes that the finding should be understood within the context of the single study. In the second, the writer implies that a wider generalization is possible. (However, it should be noted that some editors disapprove of the use of present tense here.)

TASK TEN

Review the previously highlighted citations in your reference collection. Which tenses are the most frequent? How does your data fit with the three patterns we have identified?

Variation in Reviewing the Literature

In the Language Focus on pages 344–345, we concentrated on the three main citation patterns. There are, of course, some others.

According to Suarez et al. (2010), the causes of business failure are closely related to the ratio of working capital, retained earnings, and sales.

Fang's research shows that reduced working capital and retained earnings are interrelated (Fang, 2007).

Can you come up with others?

Good writers of literature reviews employ a range of patterns in order to vary their sentences. Another form of variation involves the use of integral and non-integral citations. When the cited author is grammatically part of a sentence, the citation is referred to as integral. When the cited author is given in parentheses or referred to by a number, the citation is non-integral. Pattern 1 on page 344 contains integral citations. Non-integral citations appear in Pattern 2.

Most citations are non-integral. Under what circumstances would an integral citation be preferred?

TASK ELEVEN

Choose one of these tasks.

1. Write up a review of the self-citation literature.
2. Revise this passage.

The passage uses only the first citation pattern. As you can see, using the same structure all the time can cause the reader to lose interest. Re-write it to add more variety and provide a more apparent organization structure. Your version will probably be shorter than the original—another advantage!

The Origins of the First Scientific Articles

Banks (2011) describes the founding of the first scientific journals in London and Paris in the 1660s. Obviously, the first scientific articles had no direct models to build on, and several scholars have discussed possible influences. Ard (1983) and Valle (2000) suggest that the first articles developed from the scholarly letters that scientists were accustomed to sending to each other. Sutherland (1986) showed that early articles were also influenced by the newspaper reports of that time. Paradis (1987) described the influence of the philosophical essay. Shapin (1984) claimed that the scientific books of Robert Boyle were another model. Bazerman (1988, 1997) argued that discussions among the scientists themselves made their own contribution to the emergence of the scientific article. Finally, Gross (1990, 2008) ascribes their origins to inventories of nature and natural products.
