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English Revisited: Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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EDITORIAL

GLOSSARY

to grasp:
to understand

jocular:
humorous, playful,
joking

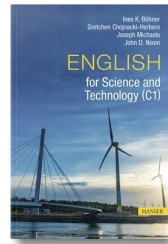
to round off:
to complete

Despite the introduction of AI tools for academic writing, students and especially graduate students still need to know how to write research papers themselves. While verb tenses in English are a tricky affair, in academic writing they are not so difficult to grasp as long as you follow some general rules, which are outlined in the grammar section of this issue of our newsletter. Our intercultural section this time takes an at times jocular look at the differences in non-verbal communication across cultures, in particular hand gestures. To round off this issue, we explore the rich history of the English language, which can provide insight into learning and remembering new words and expressions.

John Nixon

New Textbook for Technical English

The English Department's latest textbook for technical English has been published by Hanser Verlag. This book provides instructional material for students in the STEM fields at a C1 level.



Style Guidelines for Writing Official University Texts in English

[Guidelines](#)

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Some Tips on Tenses in Research Articles

While there are many challenging aspects of writing a research article, verb tenses are mercifully less complicated. The term “research article” here refers to academic papers, theses, and dissertations in the STEM fields of study, where the structure of the texts usually follows the same pattern, i.e., abstract, introduction, methodology, results/discussion, and conclusion. Nearly all if not all such texts can be written with only five tenses forms. The following overview will name these tenses in order of frequency from most to least common, describe their function, and give examples. Finally, tips on how to avoid typical mistakes will also be provided.

The present simple is by far one of the most frequent tense forms in research articles. It is used to state general facts about a topic. Such statements are often found in the introduction, where background information is established.

MOSFET transistors are an integral component in digital circuitry.

The present simple can also be used in the introduction to discuss the findings of previous research, known as the “historical present.”

Experiments by Williams and Johnson (2018) demonstrate that...

The present simple can also be found later in the paper when addressing the implications of the results.

The findings suggest that...

Another very common tense form is the past simple, which is often used to describe the setup of an experiment, which one typically finds in the introduction, methodology, and results sections.

Sussmann (2016) compared the standard model with...
Ammonium nitrate was selected as the oxidizer due to its...

Most research articles include the three remaining tenses: the present perfect, the “will” future, and the present continuous. However, they are significantly less common than the present simple and past simple. The present perfect (“has/have done”) can be utilized in the introduction to discuss something that occurred in the past but is still relevant today. This tense is often accompanied by so-called “signal words,” i.e., words that give you a hint that the present

perfect is required. These words include the following: already, yet, never, ever, since, for (plus a quantity of time), recent, so far, up to now.

Recent research has demonstrated that...
(The tense here has a similar function to the historical present but is not nearly as common.)
Due to its toxicity, asbestos has been banned in Germany since 1993.

The “will” future gives facts about the future or makes predictions. Such statements often appear towards the end of an article, where the details of an upcoming experiment or the broader implications of research are given.

The Michelin 235/35ZR19 will be replaced with X so that...
Future propulsion systems will feature...

The least common of the five tenses described here is the present continuous form. In a research article you may only find a few instances of it, if at all. It is used to describe a developing or temporary situation and is sometimes found together with the word “current/currently.”

The Institute of Thermal Turbomachinery is currently working on...

Finally, here are some common mistakes that you should avoid:

1. It is highly unlikely that you will ever really need such “exotic” tenses as the future perfect continuous (“will have been doing”) in a research article. Go for a simpler tense whenever possible.

2. Do not use the present perfect when a time in the past is specified.

Safety standards ~~have been~~ were established in 2009.

3. The present continuous should only be used as a future form when discussing social arrangements. In other words, it is doubtful that you will ever need it as a future form in a research article.

In an upcoming experiment we ~~are applying~~ will apply additional filters...

GLOSSARY

mercifully:
luckily, fortunately

theses:
plural form of thesis
(similarly: hypothesis/
hypotheses, crisis/
crises)

STEM:
Science, Technology,
Engineering and
Mathematics (German
equivalent: MINT)

toxicity:
the state of being
harmful to one’s health
(often chemicals)

instance:
occurrence, example

A Word on Hand Gestures

Like colloquial idioms, gestures and emojis can be confusing and may insult people – just take [Ronaldo's recent hand gesture in Saudi Arabia](#). This is reason enough to look at hands and fingers.

GLOSSARY

indirect cultural settings:
Direct cultures give direct and oftentimes negative feedback. In indirect cultures you often have to read the context. Much is left unsaid.

to be off your rocker (colloquial):
to be crazy

to pay in fines:
to pay money as punishment

POW:
prisoner of war

pinkie (also pinky):
little finger

Thumbs

In most parts of the world, a thumbs-up signals approval and translates into “Well done!”, a thumbs-down the opposite – yet, in Iran or Greece, a thumbs-up is offensive.

Index Finger

Pointing with your index finger at a person to single out someone can be seen as rude or impolite in indirect cultural settings. Nodding downwards in the direction of a person you are referring to might avoid conflict. Westerners refer to themselves by pointing their index finger to their chest; Asians, however, may point with their index finger to their nose when they refer to themselves – which in the West can be read as “I had the right instinct”. Tapping your index finger to your temple is never good in Germany, where it translates into “you are off your rocker” – similar to rotating your index finger close to your temple. Rude in Western Europe, the latter gesture can mean “phone me” in South America. Germans use both their thumb and index finger to indicate number 2, while for the Chinese that indicates number 8. So, by ordering two beers in China the German way, you might get eight!

OK Sign

The OK sign can also be misread. In Western Europe and North America it signals approval, in Latin America and Turkey it is generally regarded as an obscene gesture, while in Japan it stands for money and in France for zero.

Middle Finger

Hugely offensive around the world is the outstretched middle finger. It translates into “up yours”. This is why in the USA people have ended up in court over this. In Germany you may even have to pay up to EUR 4,000 in fines if you use this gesture in public.

V-Sign

Closely related to the stinky finger is the V-sign when executed palm up. The gesture is rumored to go back to the Battle of Azincourt (25/10/1415). In that day and age archers were what missiles are today: uncontrollable, powerful, and deadly. This is why the French hacked off the right-hand index and middle fingers of captured English archers. When the English had defeated the French in Azincourt, their archers are said to have paraded past the French POWs shaking their index and middle fingers upward. Churchill adopted the reverse gesture (palm facing outward) at the end of World War II, after the exiled Belgian politician Victor de Lavaleye had introduced it during the war in the occupied zones and “Colonel Britton” had popularized it in his shows for the BBC.

Fists

Staying with thumbs, index and middle fingers: In Germany you make a fist for good luck, while in the Anglophone world you cross your fingers, which in some parts of Asia is considered rude. Fists on outstretched raised arms then can signify “we shall overcome”, greeting and solidarity. Fists punched or waived in the direction of others or the *bras d'honneur* (forearm jerk) are never a good sign, as they signify anger and contempt.

The University of Texas “hook ‘em horns” (index and pinkie stretched out, and the thumb and middle and ring fingers folded into the palm) denotes their mascot, while in some parts of Latin America this gesture wards off the evil eye and the same gesture with an outstretched thumb means love. When you fold the middle finger in and hold your hand next to the side of your face, you ask people to phone them.

As confusing as this may be, all the different connotations around gestures are a good small talk topic about communication styles.

References and Further Reading
[Click here](#)

Dr. Ines Böhner

Word Origins and Learning New Vocabulary Anglo-Saxons and Vikings

GLOSSARY

West Germanic languages:
e.g. German, Dutch, English

etymology:
the origin of a word

shed light on:
reveal

retention:
(here) remembering

North Germanic languages:
e.g. Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and Icelandic

erroneously:
mistakenly

derives from:
comes from

edifice:
building

indelible:
cannot be removed or denied
(*indelible mark* = fixed expression)

Footnotes:

¹"Kin", Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed Feb. 6, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=kin>

²Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed Feb. 6, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com>

The history of the English language is rich and varied. While at its base a West Germanic language, Anglo-Saxon was heavily influenced by Norse and French following the Viking and Norman invasions of Britain. The origins of English words are not only helpful for linguists looking to piece together the history of the language, but also to learners of English because the etymology of words can sometimes shed light on their meaning, thereby easing the learning and retention of new vocabulary.

After the withdrawal of the Romans from Britannia, the arrival of Germanic tribes laid the foundation for today's English. One can see the relationship between English and German in numerous words, such as "house", "mouse" and "louse", not to mention the word "word" itself. Sometimes, however, an English word might have a different meaning to its German cognate, i.e. the word with the same origin. For instance, the word "edge" denotes the side of an object, as in the edge of a table, while the German cognate "*Ecke*" refers to the corner.

Akin to

Cognates are not always easy to identify because of the shift in their spelling and meaning. There are incidences, however, where the original meaning has been fossilized, but the use is restricted to certain expressions. The word "kin", broadly meaning family and limited to certain expressions, such as "kinship" (family ties) or "kinfolk" (relatives), is one such example. The German cognate of kin is "*Kind*" and it is also related to the words "kind" as in type or sort and "child".¹ By keeping this in mind, it becomes easier to learn words based on the stem "kin". A wonderful alternative to "similar to" is "akin to" and "next of kin" is the person most closely related to you and is often found on legal documents or government forms. There are also the terms "kindred soul" or "kindred spirit", which are used to refer to two people who are very much alike in character.

Mishap/By-Laws

The later arrival of the Vikings meant that their North Germanic language competed with Anglo-Saxon. Many of their words emerged triumphant in English, e.g. glad, egg, window (= wind eye), sky, ugly, cake, knife and skin.²

Some Old Norse words were used alongside Anglo-Saxon ones. That is why we have in English two words for "*glücklich*": "happy", originally meaning lucky in Old Norse, and "lucky" from Anglo-Saxon. The lucky connotation of the word "happy" can be seen when we consider other words with the same stem. The adjective "hapless" signifies without luck as in the "the hapless victim of a robbery". Similarly, a "mishap" (an unfortunate accident) or "happenstance" (coincidence) reveal their full meaning when one considers the meaning of the original stem "hap". Even with the verb "to happen", which simply means "to take place", it is hard not to view the randomness of life when one considers the origin of this word.

Sometimes the source of a word can be misinterpreted. It is often erroneously believed that regulations set out by cities, organizations and universities are called by-laws because they are somehow in addition to previous legislation. The word "by" actually derives from Old Norse and means "town". By-laws are therefore laws made by towns and today by extension by organizations, with the word "law" also coming from the Vikings and not the Anglo-Saxons. Today the word "by" can be found in several place names in English-speaking countries, such as Whitby (white town), Grimsby (Grim's town), Selby, Derby and Lockerbie.

Aloft

Lastly, there are instances where an English word is a cognate of both Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon. The word "aloft", which means in the air or airborne comes from Old Norse, but is also related to the German word "*Luft*". This knowledge can help learners of English find meaningful connections in order to learn new vocabulary. A loft apartment is one with an open concept and high ceilings and the loft of a barn or a house is the upper part of the edifice used for storage. Similarly, someone with lofty ambitions has set their sights high.

The origins of words can therefore reveal aspects about their meaning and help you expand your active vocabulary. In a future article, we will examine the indelible mark that French has made on English vocabulary.