

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**TENSES IN THE SCIENTIFIC PAPER**

***LOS TIEMPOS VERBALES EN EL ARTÍCULO CIENTÍFICO***

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**To the Editor:**

Today I might refer, in the simplest possible way, to the verb tenses in which each of the sections of scientific papers should be written. This grammatical category often gives many headaches to those who have not studied it thoroughly, and it should be subject of interest not only to cardiologists and cardiovascular surgeons, but also to all professionals in the biomedical sciences.

One of the most important aspects that physicians should develop is to learn how to convey their experiences; and the way to do it in writing is the publication<sup>1</sup>.

The organization of the traditional and most im-

portant article in medicine –commonly called original article– is Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion (the IMRAD structure), a structure that is not followed in the literature reviews (update articles), which require subdivision of texts with other titles and subtitles. The first journals used a fully descriptive style in chronological order (this is still used in the presentation of clinical cases), but the scientific method requires the reproduction of experiments and research. That is why the editors of scientific journals today require well-structured and concisely written manuscripts<sup>1,2</sup>.

Besides the structure, many others are the details in the writing of scientific papers that have to be carefully observed. Today, we will refer to verb tenses, for its proper use derives from scientific ethics<sup>3</sup>. When a scientific paper is validly published in a primary journal, it becomes -by that very fact- part of scientific knowledge. Therefore, whenever previously published works are referred to, ethics requires treating them with respect. To do so, they must be mentioned in the present

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tense, as established knowledge is being quoted. However, to refer to your current work, you should use the past tense. It is assumed that your work becomes established knowledge after it is published<sup>3</sup>.

The verb is a fundamental category in our language, in fact, the most intense and full of meaning. It is, therefore, the crux of the message that connects the speaker with the listener<sup>4</sup>, and the writer with the end user, who reads what has been published about the former; although the tenses are often used in an atypical manner (present tense to describe events in the past or the future tense to describe past or future events).

In the traditional article, it is generally needed to shift from the past to the present tense and vice versa. Most of the Abstract should be written in past<sup>3</sup>; it is here that your current results are referred to. The same happens with the Methods and Results sections, both must be written in past tense, since what you did and found is described here<sup>3</sup>. It does not happen in the Introduction, which should be written in present tense because here the previously established knowledge is emphasized<sup>3</sup>. Finally, in the Discussion, the present tense is usually used to refer to published works, and the past, to refer to your current results.

This theme, no doubt, lies in the crux of the main problems that arise in scientific writing. It is known that writing is not an easy task, especially since there is a kind of scientific vocabulary development going on in today's world and complex words arise as a manifestation of such changes<sup>5</sup>. However, writing a scientific paper should become an act of pleasure and enjoyment on the part of those who have the difficult task of finding solutions to problems and making them known to all: scientists, professionals and society in general<sup>6</sup>.

The verbal forms, either because of their lexical or functional nature, are key elements in the writing of any manuscript; the past, present and future tenses are part of the communication temporal system *per se*.

We could refer to many other similar issues; in fact, the Editor-in-chief of this journal mentioned several of them in an article he published in the previous issue of *CorSalud*<sup>2</sup>. The review of the summaries of *CARDIO-VILLA 2011* primarily motivated him for the writing of such paper, which indicates that these problems begin to be a concern not only for linguists.

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