Verb Issues for ESL Writers

There are three basic tenses in the English language: past, present, and future. Rules dictate usage in each tense, but many key verbs in English are irregular. The rules in this handout will serve as a guide as you write technical documents, but keep in mind that you may need to modify your verb constructions as you become more familiar with Standard English.

Past Tense
Verbs in the past tense describe things that are done and over with.

Examples:

He analyzed the data.
They analyzed the data.
I analyzed the data.

Notice how verbs in the past tense add an -ed regardless of the agent (subject).

Present Tense
Verbs in the present tense describe things that are always true or ongoing.

Examples:

He analyzes.
They analyze.
I analyze.

Notice the difference between the way the verb conjugates when ‘he,’ ‘they,’ and ‘I’ are in the agent slot.

Future Tense
Verbs in the future tense describe things that will happen (or are likely) to happen.

He will analyze the data.
They will analyze the data.
I will analyze the data.

Notice that the future tense uses ‘will’, a helping verb. This helping verb never changes form.

Helping Verbs
The “will” from the previous example is a helping verb. Helping verbs modify a verb in mood or tense. Helping verbs include: can, could, may, might, must, shall, will, would, ought, had better, ought to, would rather, have to, have got to, be supposed to, be able to, used to.
Helping Verb Rules
Helping verbs follow three basic rules:

1. Helping verbs always go before the verb!
2. The primary verb always looks like it is in the present tense.
3. Neither verb ever conjugates. “Will” stays the same no matter what the subject is.

Examples for Practice

Convert the following into the future tense:

1) Our results indicate that the modified drying procedure will produce the best results.
2) Without the spare time to complete the models, the work is worthless.
3) The paperwork places excess demand on the participants’ time.
4) The result never come back this quickly.

Convert the following into the present tense:

5) All but one of the ternary mixtures obtained a durability factor (DF) higher than the minimum 60% value used in ASTM C 666 to terminate the freeze-thaw test.
6) Similar to flexural strength data, the paste and fly ash content were found to be statistically significant variables affecting freezing and thawing of the ternary mixtures.

Convert the following into the future tense:

7) The magnitude of free drying shrinkage (monitored up to 224 days) was also found to be primarily the function of paste content.
8) However, the shrinkage of ternary mixtures was significantly lower than that of control mixtures, which clearly demonstrates the benefit of using supplementary cementitious materials.
Consider whether the present or future tense is more logical in these revisions.