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SSC - 245

Helping Verbs

Overview: Helping verbs aid in expressing the mood, tense, and voice of the main verb. Combining a helping verb with the main verb can help indicate time and other meanings. The helping verbs *be* and *have* are unlike modal verbs because they can function alone in a sentence, acting as the main verb.

Have + Past Tense Verb

- 1) This construction indicates the Present Perfect tense, and can be used to describe an action that happened at an unspecified time in the past:
 - Elisa **has** *discussed* her options with the counselor and decided to drop the class.
At some point, Elisa talked to her counselor, then decided to drop the class.
- 2) It can also be used to describe an action that began in the past and is still going on.
 - Gene and George **have** *worked* at the deli for two years.
Gene and George started working at the deli two years ago, and are still working there.

Had + Past Tense Verb

- 1) This construction indicates the Past Perfect Tense, and is used to describe actions that began and ended in the past. It's usually used to discuss an action that took place in the past, before another more recent action in the past.
 - Elisa **had** *discussed* her options with the counselor on Monday before she dropped the class on Tuesday.
Elisa talked to her counselor, before something else that happened in the past (dropping the class).
 - Gene and George **had** *worked* at the deli for two years when the store went out of business.
Gene and George used to work at the deli, but they don't anymore because the store closed.

Is + Verb-ing

- 1) This construction indicates the Present Continuous tense, and can be used to describe an action that is happening now.
 - Elisa **is** *discussing* her options with the counselor.
Elisa is in her counselor's office right this minute.
- 2) It can also be used to describe an action that is happening over a period of time.
 - Gene and George **are** *working* at the deli.
Gene and George are working at the deli at this point in their careers.

Was + Verb-ing

1) This construction indicates the Past Continuous tense, and can be used to describe an action that was in progress in the past, often to set the scene for an action that interrupted.

- Elisa **was** *discussing* her options with the counselor when the power went out.
Elisa was in her counselor's office, and while they were talking there was a power outage.

3) It can also be used to describe several actions that were in progress simultaneously in the past.

- Gene **was** *washing* the cutting boards and George **was** *working* at the counter.
Gene and George were working on different tasks at the same time.

Practice: Though helping verbs have an important role in writing, remember that most writing is clearer in the active voice. Many academic disciplines prefer the active voice, but in some areas the passive voice is preferred. Always follow the guidelines of a particular assignment. Now take a look at your own writing. Do you use helping verbs excessively? If so, try rewriting a sentence that uses a "be" helping verb by letting the main verb stand alone. Is the meaning the same? How would your reader best understand your intent?