ESL students often have difficulty using tenses correctly in subordinate clauses. I hope that this lesson will help you understand the basic rules of sequence of tenses. The sentences given below demonstrate the correct relationship of tenses between clauses.

**When the main clause is in the simple present tense**

When the main clause is in the **simple present tense**, use a **simple present tense** in the **subordinate clause** to show same-time action.

- When you heat ice it melts.
- I want to go back because I miss my parents.
- When I am late my father takes me to school.
- My mom gets angry when I don’t eat breakfast.

When the **main clause** is in the **simple present tense**, use a past tense in the subordinate clause to talk about something that happened earlier.

- I understand that I was wrong.
- I know that I made a mistake.
- I admit that I didn’t do the right thing.
- I believe that we backed the wrong candidate.

When the **main clause** is in the **simple present tense**, use a simple future tense in the subordinate clause to talk about something that is yet to happen in the future.

- The reserve bank governor says that he will reduce interest rates.
- The police inspector says that he will investigate the case.

**When the main clause is in the simple past tense**

When the **main clause** is in the **simple past tense**, use the past tense in the subordinate clause to talk about another completed past action.

- I went home because I was not feeling well.
- She worked hard because she wanted to pass the test.
- I helped her because I liked her.

When the **main clause** is in the **simple past tense**, use a past perfect tense in the subordinate clause to talk about an earlier past action.

- The patient died before the doctor had arrived.
- She knew that she had made a mistake.