

# What I was doing vs. what I did: How verb aspect influences memory and behavior

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If you want to perform at your peak, you should carefully consider how you discuss your past actions. In a new study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, psychologists William Hart of the University of Florida and Dolores Albarracn from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign reveal that the way a statement is phrased (and specifically, how the verbs are used), affects our memory of an event being described and may also influence our behavior.

In these experiments, a group of volunteers were interrupted prior to finishing a [word game](#) and were then asked to describe their behavior using the imperfective (e.g., I was solving word puzzles) or perfective (e.g., I solved word puzzles) aspect. The volunteers then completed a memory test (for the word game) or a word game which was similar to the first one they had worked on.

It turns out, the volunteers who had described their behavior using the imperfective aspect were able to recall more specific details of their experience compared to volunteers who had described their behavior in the perfective aspect. The volunteers writing in the imperfective aspect also performed better on the second word game and were more willing to complete the task than did volunteers who used the perfective to describe their experience.

The authors surmise that when we think about our past behavior in the imperfective (e.g. what we were doing), we tend to imagine that behavior as ongoing (and not completed yet). This enables us to easily think about what went into that behavior and may help us improve performance on similar tasks in the future.

The authors note that these findings may be relevant to behavioral therapy. They suggest that "decreasing the frequency of unhealthy behaviors might be facilitated by discussing these behaviors

in terms of what I did. In contrast, increasing the frequency of healthy behaviors might be facilitated by discussing these behaviors in terms of what I was doing."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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