The Rules:
The simple tenses tend to be the most basic forms of a verb. With the exception of the simple future will, the simple tenses do not take a helping (also called modal or auxiliary) verb.

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<th>Simple Tenses</th>
<th>Use this tense when describing actions that occur at a particular time.</th>
<th>Example Verb Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>Simple Present</td>
<td>Describes events that usually, habitually, and always exist. Example: The water in Lake Michigan is cold.</td>
<td>I eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Past</td>
<td>Describes events that were completed in the past. Example: Last summer I walked to Lake Michigan.</td>
<td>I ate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Future</td>
<td>Describes events that will occur at a particular time in the future. Example: Next summer I will swim in Florida.</td>
<td>I will eat</td>
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</table>

Other common uses of the simple tenses:

Simple present:
1. Used to state general statements of fact and general truths. Example: The Chicago Cubs are an excellent baseball team. (although this statement could be interpreted as an opinion, here the simple present “are” indicates that the speaker means it as a statement of truth or fact.)

2. Used to express future time when the sentence describes an event on a definite schedule or timetable. This meaning is usually only used with certain verbs, such as to begin, to end, to open, to close, to start, to finish, to arrive, and to leave. Example: Tomorrow, the library opens at 7 o’clock in the morning. (the present tense “opens” indicates that the library’s hours are part of a set schedule, and that its opening is a regular event; the statement thus implies that this action will also happen tomorrow).

3. Also can be used to express future time in conjunction with the word “when” and the simple future. These sentences use the following pattern: “When” + simple present clause + simple future clause. Example: She will be coming around the mountain when she comes. (Here, the clause “when she comes” has a future meaning because her coming will happen at the same time as her movement around the mountain.)

Simple past:
Usually used in conjunction with a specific mention of time, such as yesterday or last week. Example: Last semester, the students submitted the article to the scholarly journal, but the article wasn’t formally accepted until last week.
2. If the sentence uses a dependent clause with “when,” and both clauses use the simple past, then the “when” clause happened first.

Example: When I finished giving my speech to the class, the students clapped politely. (here the use of when indicates that the speaker finished talking first, and then everyone applauded; both events happened in the past.)

One Reason Why These Rules Can Be Confusing:
The use of the simple present to convey a future meaning can seem counterintuitive or backwards. This sense may be easier to understand if you think of this meaning as an extension of the statement of fact, habit, or truth.

Practice:
Complete the following sentences with a correct form of the verb in parentheses.

1. Artichokes ______ (to be) unquestionably delicious vegetables.
2. When we ______ (to cross) the border, the guards ______ (to check) our passports and visas.
3. When we ______ (to finish) our experiment, we ______ (to discover) that our original hypotheses was incorrect.
4. Lightning ______ (to strike) and ______ (to kill) the apple tree last month.
5. We ______ (to move) out of the dorms tomorrow.

Further Resources:
- “Active Verb Tenses” (Purdue Owl)
- “Verb Tense Consistency” (Purdue Owl)

These materials were partially adapted from: