

# **‘Was Doing’ Versus ‘Did’: Verbs Matter When Judging Other People’s Intentions**

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Your English teacher wasn’t kidding: Grammar really does matter. The verb form used to describe an action can affect how the action is perceived—and these subtle variations could mean the difference between an innocent or guilty verdict in criminal law, according to a new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

William Hart, of the University of Alabama, was inspired to conduct the study by research on how people think about narratives. “Research was showing that when you describe somebody’s actions in terms of what they’re ‘doing,’ that action is way more vivid in [a reader’s] mind” than if the action is described in terms of what the person ‘did.’ At the same time, other researchers had found that when people imagine action vividly, they were more likely to think the person performing the action was doing it intentionally.

In the new study, Hart and Dolores Albarracín of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign set out to bridge the research gap and learn whether verb form influenced people’s perceptions of intentionality—for example, if a person who “was shooting” a gun appeared to have more criminal intent than a person who “shot” a gun.

Study volunteers were asked to take the perspective of a judge in a criminal case as they read a short case report of a crime, in which one man shot another after an argument broke out during a dice game. The case report was written with verbs in either the imperfective (“was pulling out his gun”) or perfective (“pulled out his gun”) form.

Volunteers who read that the defendant “was firing gun shots” thought that the perpetrator had more harmful intent than did people who read that he “fired gun shots.” They also imagined the crime unfolding in more detail.

This phenomenon could clearly matter in criminal trials. “A defense attorney or a prosecutor could use these little differences to potentially change trial outcomes,” Hart says.

Verb choices can affect communication outside of the courtroom, too. People constantly judge each other based on whether someone did something on purpose or without thinking; in the latter case, we might be willing to cut someone a bit more slack. Hart calls it “startling” that one of the most important parts of social life—the ability to think about other people’s goals and intentions—can hinge on one small point of grammar.