

VERB TENSES—LITERATURE

Use of the correct verb tense allows you to express clearly the time relationships among your ideas. When deciding which verb tense to use, aim for consistency, simplicity, and clarity. Whenever possible, keep verbs in the same tense (consistency), and use either the simple present or the past tense (simplicity). Above all, choose the verb tense that most clearly expresses the idea you want to convey (clarity). In general, use the **present tense** to describe actions and states of being that are still true in the present; use the **past tense** to describe actions or states of being that occurred exclusively in the past.

Below are some discipline-specific guidelines for how to use verb tenses effectively in literature and the humanities. For details on tenses in science writing, see handout “Verb Tenses—Science.”

Use the present tense to describe fictional events that occur in the text:

(This use of present tense is referred to as “the historical present.”)

- *In Milton's Paradise Lost, Satan **tempts** Eve in the form of a serpent.*
- *Voltaire's Candide **encounters** numerous misfortunes throughout his travels.*

Also use the present tense to report your interpretations and the interpretations of other sources:

- *Odysseus **represents** the archetypal epic hero.*
- *Flanagan **suggests** that Satan is the protagonist of Paradise Lost.*

Use the past tense to explain historical context or elements of the author's life that occurred exclusively in the past:

- *Hemingway **drew** on his experiences in World War I in constructing the character of Jake Barnes.*

When writing about literature, use both present and past tense when combining observations about fictional events from the text (present tense) with factual information (past tense):

- *James Joyce, who **grew up** in the Catholic faith, **draws** on church doctrine to illuminate the roots of Stephen Dedalus' guilt.*
- *In Les Belles Images, Simone de Beauvoir accurately **portrays** the complexities of a marriage even though she never **married** in her lifetime.*

Use the present perfect tense to describe an event that occurs in the text previous to the principal event you are describing:

- *The governess **questions** the two children because she believes they **have seen** the ghosts.*
- *Convinced that Desdemona **has been** unfaithful to him, Othello **strangles** her.*

Use the past tense when referring to an event occurring before the story begins:

- *In the opening scenes of Hamlet, the men are visited by the ghost of Hamlet's father, whom Claudius **murdered**.*

Credit: Adapted from "Verb Tense," *Hamilton University Writing Center*. 16 October 2017, <https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/centers/writing/writing-resources/verb-tense>.

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