

*Using Sources Tutorial:*

## **Tutorial #25:**

# **Writing About Literature: Correct Verb Tense**

**When to Use Present Tense**

**When to Use Past Tense**

**When to Use Other Tenses**

**Writing Center**

**English 800 Center**

**All notes and exercises should be done on separate sheets of paper, which you should bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.**

**As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.**

# Writing About Literature: Correct Verb Tense

## Part One: Using Present Tense in Literature Essays

Whenever we read or discuss literary works—short stories, novels, poems and plays—they seem vivid and alive. Thus, when discussing these works, we use present tense, no matter what tense the authors, poets and playwrights used when they wrote the works—and even if the writers themselves are no longer alive. The present tense highlights the vividness with which events reoccur whenever we think and write about them.

Since literary works are often written in the past tense, it is easy to shift verb tenses accidentally when you are writing an essay, especially after quoting from a literary work written in past tense. This tutorial will help you understand when to choose present, past, or present perfect verb tense.

Use the **present tense** to describe fictional events in the text:

- In Flynn's *Gone Girl*, the character Amy Dunne **attempts** to fake her own death.
- Voltaire's *Candide* **encounters** numerous misfortunes throughout his travels.

Also, use the **present tense** to describe literary elements like characters, setting or theme:

- In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Plum **is** a World War I veteran who **is** a defeated, depressed heroin addict.
- The setting of *Sula* **is** a poor African American community that **exists** on the top of a barren hill in Ohio.

When writing about literature, also use the **present tense** to report your own interpretations and the interpretations of other sources:

- Odysseus **represents** the archetypal epic hero.
- In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford's three husbands **signify** distinct phases of her life.
- Marxist critics of *The Great Gatsby* **contend** that Tom and Daisy represent the power and arrogance of the wealthy while George and Myrtle **suggest** the powerlessness and vulnerability of the working class.

**Principle I. Use present tense when you are writing about fictional events; describing and analyzing literary elements such as character, setting or theme; or reporting your interpretations or the interpretations of other sources.**

### Exercise 1

**Instructions:** Using Principle I, write one sentence that describes something that happens in a literary work you have recently read. Then, write another sentence that says what you think the theme of that work is. Make sure you use the correct verb tense in each sentence.

### Part Two: Using Past Tense in Literature Essays

You should use the **past tense** when you are writing about the author's life or the historical time period when the literary work takes place, because historical events and elements of the author's background occurred in the past:

- The Harlem Renaissance, the period when Langston Hughes **wrote** much of his best poetry, **was** a flowering of African American music, art, and literature during the 1920s.
- World War I **was** the setting and subject of the vivid poetry of Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg; this war **involved** terrible waste of human life, and both poets **died** during combat.

Also use the **past tense** when you are referring to an event that happened before the literary work began:

- In the opening scenes of *Hamlet*, the men are visited by the ghost of Hamlet's father, whom Claudius **murdered**.
- In beginning chapters of *The Great Gatsby*, everyone wonders how Gatsby **made** his money.

In the previous examples, Claudius murdered Hamlet's father **before** the beginning of the play, and Gatsby is already rich when the novel begins.

**Principle II. Use past tense when writing about historical events, the author's life, and events that occurred *before* the beginning of the story, poem or play.**

## Exercise 2

**Instructions:** Using Principle II, write one sentence that describes something that happened *before* the beginning of a literary work that you have recently read. Then write a sentence about the author's life. Make sure you use the correct verb tense in each sentence.

### **Part Three: Using Present Perfect in a Literature Essay**

Use the **present perfect** tense (*have* or *has* + the present participle) to describe an event that has occurred in the text before the event you are currently describing:

- After her funeral, the townspeople discover that Miss Emily has slept with a corpse for over thirty years.
- Convinced that Desdemona **has been** unfaithful to him, Othello strangles her.

In the first example, the townspeople discover something that has occurred earlier in the story: that Miss Emily has slept with the corpse of Homer Barron. In the second example, the event that is currently being described is Othello strangling Desdemona; if Desdemona had been unfaithful, it would have happened earlier in the play.

**Principle III. Use present perfect when writing about an event that occurred or might have occurred *in the text* before the event you are currently describing.**

## Exercise 3

**Instructions:** Using a literary work you have recently read, write a sentence that illustrates Principle III: use present perfect when writing about an event that occurred or might have occurred *in the text* before the event you are currently describing.

### **Part Four: Combining Tenses in the Same Sentence or Paragraph**

Literature essays often require writers to describe both the events in the work and the historical context or the author's biography. Writers may also wish to refer to events that happened before the work of literature began—or to events that happened earlier in the text than the event they are

currently describing. Thus, in almost all literature essays, writers must use more than one verb tense, often in the same paragraph or even in the same sentence. In fact, you can see more than one tense in many of the previous examples in this tutorial. The following examples use both **present** and **past tense** because the writer is interpreting literature (**present tense**) and including factual information about the author's life (**past tense**):

- In the novel *The Portrait of an Artist of a Young Man* by James Joyce, who **grew up** in the Catholic faith, church doctrine **illuminates** 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.

### Exercise 4

**Instructions:** Using Principles I, II, and III, write the correct verb above the verb in the parentheses. The first one is done for you.

**won**

1. *Lighthouse*, Terrance Hayes' fourth volume of poetry, **(to win)** the National Book Award. All the poems in this volume **(to shake)** and **(to jive)** with a loose associative whimsy. But Hayes was not simply jive-talking. The battle between darkness and light—and all their metaphorical associations—**(to give)** the brisk, alliterative sounds a depth that makes readers want to read them twice. “A Plate of Bones,” a poem about the complicated inheritance of a relative's racism, begins “My slick black muscular back- / talking uncle drawing me and a school / of fish corpses to church.” As the poem **(to continue)**, and the speaker's uncle **(to rage)** about his cousin's date with a white man, readers come across the surprising line: “I let him feed me / the anger I knew was a birthright, / a plate of bones thin enough to puncture / a lung.”
2. Although Flannery O'Connor, who **(to die)** in 1964, **(to be)** not a member of the working class, the majority of her characters **(to be)** rural, working-class people. In her novels and short stories, working-class people **(to be)** happier in their station in life and also **(to**

**experience**) less loneliness than upper-class people.

3. In *Sula*, readers find out about several events that **(to happen)** even before the beginning of the novel. For example, after her husband Boy Boy **(to abandon)** their family, Eva Peace **(to have)** no money and no possibility of a job. She **(to leave)** her three small children with a neighbor and **(to insure)** her leg for a large sum of money. She **(to place)** her leg on a railroad track as a train **(to approach)**, to make sure that she **(to have)** enough money for her children to survive. During the novel, Eva **(to do)** not understand why her daughter Hannah **(to need)** to be told that Eva **(to love)** her. To Eva, the sacrifice of her leg shows her love for Hannah.
4. At the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Caraway **(to reflect)** on the events that **(to happen)** earlier in the novel. At this point, he **(to realize)** that Tom, Daisy and Jordan are careless people.

## Exercise 5

### Instructions:

1. Review an essay about literature where your teacher has graded and marked verb tense errors. Compare your verb tenses to the principles in this tutorial. This will also help you realize if you are using them correctly.
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

### Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay