

How (and Why) Do I Write in Literary Present Tense?

Literary works, paintings, films, and other artistic creations are assumed to exist in an eternal present. Therefore, when you write about writers or artists as they express themselves in their work, use the present tense.

The Basic Rule: You should use the past tense when discussing historical events, and you should use the literary present when discussing fictional events.

1. When commenting on what a writer says, use the present tense.

Example: Dunn *begins* his work with a view into the lives and motivations of the very first settlers.

Example: Through this anecdote, Richter *illustrates* common misconceptions about native religion and *shows* why missionary attempts were less than successful.

2. When describing an author's work, however, use the past tense.

Example: In 1966, Driss Chraïbi *published* La Civilisation, ma Mère!

3. When you are writing about a certain historical event (even the creation of a literary or artistic work), use the past tense.

Examples:

Henry Fielding *wrote* in the eighteenth century.

Picasso *produced* a series of sculptures.

4. When discussing events in a book or story, always use the present tense, unless there is a shift in the time frame within the world of the text.

Example: Evelyn then *rips* into the carefully wrapped package and *finds* the greatest gift she has ever received. Her eyes *fill* with tears as she *gazes* at the jewel, but Philip *does not know* that these tears are the results of more than surprised joy. Evelyn *is suffering* from guilt as she *compares* this present to the shoddy gift that she *bought** for her beau.

* "Bought" is in past tense because the buying of the present occurred before the described set of events.

Here are some additional examples of literary present tense:

In Michelangelo's painting, Christ *judges* the world.

Johnson's characters *journey* to Cairo.

Plato *argues* without much conviction.

Paul *writes* about the hardships he has endured.

5. Sometimes a sentence must employ both present and past tense.

Examples:

The first part of the poem, which she *completed* in 1804, *describes* the effects of isolation from society.

Aeschylus' drama *is concerned* with what happens to Orestes after he *has killed* his mother.



Remember: It is important to stay consistent. Moving between verb tenses can be confusing for your reader. Examine your changes of tense very carefully and make sure there is a logical reason for them.

Style Tip: If you need to shift tense more than three times in a single sentence, consider breaking up the sentence into a couple of shorter sentences to maintain reading ease.