

Things to Eliminate in Your Writing:

Writing in Past Tense

Part I: What is it?



Before we define the problem, let's review the major English tenses.

Present

Simple present	Mr. Davidson grades	verb (+ s/es for third person)
Present progressive	Mr. Davidson is grading	am/is/are + present participle
Present perfect	Mr. Davidson has graded	has/have + past participle
Present perfect progressive	Mr. Davidson has been grading	has/have been + present participle

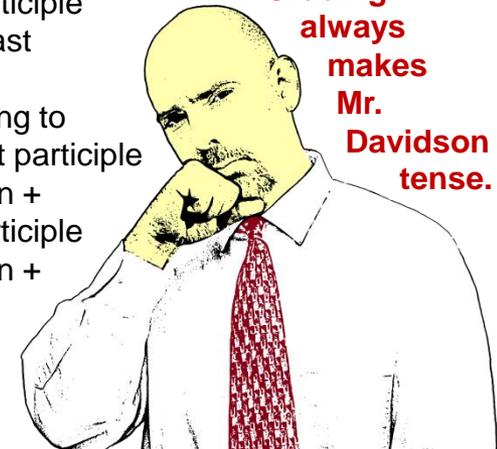
Past

Simple past	Mr. Davidson graded	verb + d/ed/t (except for irregular verbs)
Past progressive	Mr. Davidson was grading	was/were + past participle
Past perfect	Mr. Davidson had graded	had + past participle
Past perfect progressive	Mr. Davidson had been grading	had been + present participle

Future

Simple future	Mr. Davidson will grade	will + verb
Future progressive	Mr. Davidson is going to grade	am/is/are going to + verb
	Mr. Davidson will be grading	will be + present participle
	Mr. Davidson is going to be grading	am/is/are going to be + present participle
Future perfect	Mr. Davidson will have graded	will have + past participle
	Mr. Davidson is going to have graded	am/is/are going to have + past participle
Future perfect progressive	Mr. Davidson will have been grading	will have been + present participle
	Mr. Davidson is going to have been grading	will have been + present participle

**Grading
always
makes
Mr.
Davidson
tense.**



Wait a second; do I actually have to memorize these terms?

I suppose in a perfect world you would memorize the terms and understand exactly what they mean. In a less perfect world, you would understand how each tense functions-- even if you didn't remember the precise terms. In the world in which I actually live, I am more or less satisfied if you would use the chart to be able to follow some of the examples I give later in this mini-lesson.

For the record: simple tenses are pretty self-explanatory; perfect tenses are those where the action is “made complete” or “completely done” (from the literal definition of the word *perfect*); and progressive tenses are those in which the action is “in progress.”

Back to the issue at hand, though...

Writing in the past tense is when students use past tense verbs to write about plot points in a literary text. This is especially the case when the tense of the verbs in the original text are in the past tense (true most of the time). Here's an example:

That Brontë values individuality over obedience to societal norms is illustrated by Jane's early experiences at Gateshead. At a young age Jane **refused** to be mistreated and punished for things over which she **had** no control over. The most obvious example **was** when Jane **was locked** into the red room after an altercation with her cousin John Reed.

**Part II:
Why is this a problem?**

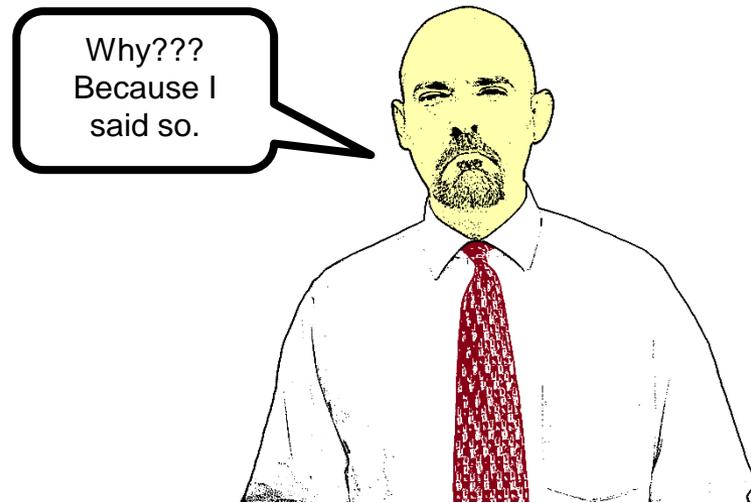


The explanation that is usually given is that literature exists in the “eternal present.” In this sense, it is timeless. Sometimes the explanation relates back to the act of reading (as opposed to events that are being described), since the words exist on the page (waiting to be read) in the here and now.

The reality, though, is this is mostly a convention. You are supposed to default to the present tense simply because everyone agrees that this is the way it is done.

That said, even though no explanation I can give you about why you should write in the present tense is going to be terribly compelling, if you don't do it this way, you will immediately flag yourself as someone who doesn't know what s/he is doing. This is not the impression you want to create.

Like anything, though, it's more complicated than it seems, so don't skip the next part of the lesson.



Part III: What to do Instead



Default to Present Tense

When writing about literature, default to present tense verbs.

Here's the example from earlier:

That Brontë values individuality over obedience to societal norms is illustrated by Jane's early experiences at Gateshead. At a young age Jane **refuses** to be mistreated and punished for things over which she **has** no control over. The most obvious example **is** when Jane **is locked** into the red room after an altercation with her cousin John Reed.

Important thing to note: this rule **only** applies to the relating of events from the text. It does **NOT** apply to any historical events you might reference or biographical data about the author.

Do **NOT** do this:

Charlotte Brontë **writes** Jane Eyre in 1847 after her first manuscript, *The Professor*, **is** turned down by a Cornhill publisher.

In this case, instead use **wrote** and **was** since you are writing about historical events.

Complication One: When Present Tense is Confusing or Misleading

While the general rule is to use present tense, sometimes it becomes necessary to compare different chronological events within the same text. For example, look at this sentence:

Jane soon **suspects** that the mysterious stranger that she **had encountered** outside of Thornfield Hall **will become** the love of her life.

The main verb is in present tense (*suspects*), but it also references events that happen before this suspicion (the present perfect *had encountered*) and after it (the future tense *will become*). If you write:

Jane soon **suspects** that the mysterious stranger that she **encounters** outside of Thornfield Hall **is** the love of her life.

it changes the meaning of the sentence. The suspicion, the encounter, and her falling in love would all be happening more or less simultaneously-- which isn't how it happens at all in the novel. The encounter happens first, followed by the suspicion that something will happen over time (even though it has yet to occur).

Complication Two: Weirdness When Writing about the Author

In my simple version of the rule, I wrote that stuff that the author did and wrote should be written about in the past tense-- to treat these as historical (and not literary) events.

However, when writing about an author's views (as expressed or inferred in a text), use the present tense. For example, if I were writing about a theme in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, I might write:

For Brontë, a happiness that **causes** one to abandon one's principles **is** a false promise that can never result in true satisfaction,

even though Charlotte Brontë is long dead, and it might seem that her opinion would, thus, be a historical fact (as opposed to a literary one). While this inference makes perfect sense, it is, in fact, wrong. Again, it's a convention.

Sometimes you will even write sentences about the author that will mix past and present tenses, such as:

In *Jane Eyre*, a novel Charlotte Brontë **wrote** in 1847, the author argues that a happiness that **causes** one to abandon one's principles **is** a false promise that can never result in true satisfaction.

Part IV: Conclusions



Conclusions

When writing about events in a literary text, use present tense.

The exception to this is when you are comparing different chronological events in a text-- from what *is* happening to what *has* happened and/or what *will* happen.

When writing about actual historical events, use past tense. This includes biographical events and references to when a work was written.

The exception to this rule is when you write about an author's views as expressed in a text. In this case, write in present tense.