

Uses of the Present Tense

1. Use the present tense in statements that are generally true, have no reference to time, express universal truth, or describe habitual action.

Brevity is the soul of wit.
Corn grows rapidly in hot, humid weather.
All people are mortal.
He longs for final answers.

2. Use the present tense when you are discussing what an author says in a composition.

In *On Civil Disobedience* Thoreau contends that one ought not to obey an unjust law.

3. Use the present tense when you are discussing the plot of a fictional work. Think of fiction as existing in a timeless world:

In *The Color Purple* Alice Walker shows the lasting affections between two sisters.
In *The Crucible* John Proctor decides to die rather than tarnish his reputation.
In Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, the Baron snips off a lock of Belinda's hair when she beats him at cards.

These events occur anew for each reader, and, in a scene, they are always happening. Thus, references to events occurring in fiction should be made in the present tense.

Note: This rule, like all rules, has exceptions. The major exception occurs when you must take into account the order or progression of events within a piece of fiction or when you must describe events that occurred before the start of the work. In these cases, use the present tense for the events currently under discussion and forms of the past tense to refer to events that occurred before the event currently under discussion.

Hamlet had been abroad when his father died. He returned to Denmark to find Claudius on the throne and he has been upset ever since. Thus, when the ghost appears on the battlements, he is more than willing to believe what the ghost tells him.

4. Use the present tense when you refer to an author's purpose in a work, for the purpose remains the same throughout time.

Pope satirizes the frivolity of a privileged society.

He satirized it when he wrote the poem and he still satirizes it now, as any current reader discovers. For the same reason, references to an author's method or use of devices within a literary work should be made in the present tense.

Miller implicitly compares the witch hunts of 1692 with those of 1950.
Burns uses the rose to suggest a woman's beauty.
Elizabeth Bishop builds intricate structures of rhyme and meter in much of her poetry.

5. Use the **past** tense generally for historical events, even those which involve the author of a composition.

Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock*.

Miller was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee.
Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley grew up in Missouri.

These events are not timeless fictional ones; they occurred at an actual past historical time. Thus they demand the use of the past tense.

Confusion may occur when you refer to timeless events in the same sentence or paragraph in which you refer to an actual historical event. If you are speaking of both actual historical events and timeless fictional events in the same sentence or paragraph, the use of two different tenses is correct.

Miller wrote the play during a bleak time in American history, when Senator Joseph McCarthy showed the world how easily fear can lead to tyranny. Miller's play, *The Crucible*, shows how mass hysteria builds until no citizen is safe, even one who wishes to remain separate from society's problems.

6. Writing that uses documents as part of the historical record may involve exceptions to the rule that mandates use of the present tense for discussing what an author says in a composition. When you use a document to trace the historical development of an idea, you may use either the past or present tense to discuss the document and its contents—your choice depends on how you are considering the document and its contents:

The document argues that the people have the right to free speech.
(The main clause discusses the substance of this particular document; the dependent clause describes a general truth.)

The document argues that the people had the right to free speech.
(The main clause discusses the substance of this particular document; the dependent clause refers to a specific people at a specific time.)

The document argued that the people have the right to free speech.
(The main clause discusses this document as one of a progression of documents written at various named times; the dependent clause describes a general truth.)

The document argued that the people had the right to free speech.
(The main clause discusses the document as one of a progression of documents written at various name times; the dependent clause refers to a specific people at a specific time.)