

VERB TENSE FOR ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE AND HISTORY

Writing about literature

1. Whether you are dealing with fiction, poetry, or nonfiction literature, use the present tense (also called the literary present tense) to discuss the actions and thoughts presented in the text. Do this because literature exists as a present phenomenon regardless of whether or not its author is alive. Here are some examples (the pertinent verbs are in bold type):

In his "Qualities of the Prince," Machiavelli **writes** that it **is** better for a prince to be armed, because "among the other bad effects it causes, being disarmed makes you despised" (38).

In her essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker **discusses** the history of African American women and **describes** how "they dreamed dreams no one knew—not even themselves, in any coherent fashion—and saw visions no one could understand" as a result of the silence inflicted upon them by lack of education and prejudice (232).

2. Use past tense when writing about historical events, even those events involving the artists'/writers' actions in the past (pertinent verbs are in bold type):

Machiavelli **fell** out of favor when the Medici princes **returned** to power and **was imprisoned** on suspicion of crimes against the state.

Alice Walker's parents **were** sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia. She **participated** in the Civil Rights Movement and **published** novels, short stories, poetry, essays, and children's books.

3. Occasionally, you'll need to use both present and past tense when discussing the author's position and opinions in the text and the author as a historical figure. At these times, it's helpful to split the author into two personas, the authorial voice—the one writing the text—and the historical figure—who lived and (unless that author is a contemporary) died. If you need further help doing this, on early drafts of your essays you can refer to the authorial persona always as the "author" and use the author's name to refer to the historical person. During the revision process, you can then go back in and use the author's name occasionally to refer to the authorial persona so as to avoid repetitiveness. Note how this procedure is used in the following examples:

As "The Yellow Wallpaper" hints, **Perkins** associated her experience with Weir Mitchell's rest cure with the experience of her protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper." By juxtaposing the protagonist's loss of sanity to her acquiescence to her husband's admonitions that she stay quiet and not do any productive work, the **author** is able to explore her own past, one in which **Perkins** too, was subject to a rest cure, and in which **Perkins** came close to losing her sanity as fully as does her protagonist in the story.

Now, you can see the above without the labels discriminating authorial persona from historical person:

As "The Yellow Wallpaper" shows us, **Perkins** associated her experience with Weir Mitchell's rest cure with the experience of her protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper." By juxtaposing the protagonist's loss of sanity to her acquiescence to her husband's admonitions that she stay quiet and not do any productive work, **Perkins** is able to explore her own past, one in which **she** too, was subject to a rest cure, and in which **she** came close to losing her sanity as fully as does her protagonist in the story.

4. Sometimes, also, when writing about poetry and fiction, you'll not only have the poet to contend with as a historical or authorial figure, but also the speaker of the poem or the narrator of the story (verbs have been cast in bold type).

In his poem "Punishment," Seamus Heaney's speaker **begins reflecting** upon the body of the Windeby bog girl. The speaker **is viewing** the body either on display in a museum, or, like Heaney himself **did**, in archaeologist P.V. Glob's book, *The Bog People*. The Windeby bog girl **was killed**, possibly for committing adultery, during the days of the Roman historian Tacitus, who **lived** around the time of the girl's death, from approximately 50-150 A.D. As the speaker **describes** the girl's body and her horrific death, he **comes to admire** her, then to **admit** to a certain complicity with her killers, even though he actually **didn't participate** in her murder. The speaker **identifies** with the killers because he **stood**, as the poet Heaney himself **stood**, and **watched** in silence as the bog girl's "betraying sisters"—Irish women contemporary with the speaker and Heaney who **dared consort** with British soldiers and thus "**betrayed**" their Irish compatriots—**were bound, stripped, and tied** to the railing and then "**cauled** with tar" in front of a condemning Irish public.

B. Writing about history

1. Again, use past tense to relate a historical fact. In writing about history, since you are not talking about a writer's or historical figure's timeless literary intent, but about things she/he said or did in a real time or place, you use the past tense (verbs have been cast in bold type).

Although Lodge once **had supported** a post-war league, he **reversed** himself after Wilson **linked** such a plan to the concept of "peace without victory."

This principle applies to thoughts as well as actions:

Many progressives, who **thought** well of Wilson's dream of a new world order, **drew back** in revulsion when the terms of the treaty **were published**.

2. In general, use the present tense for giving opinions current among historians today. You will find the historical present of particular help when writing book reviews, for example (verbs have been cast in bold type).

Link **contends** that Wilson's critics **have minimized** the difficulties he **faced**.

3. Finally, it's probably better to convey your historical statements in sentences that discuss directly the actions of historical actors, not the content of the sources (verbs have been cast in bold type). So, instead of saying, "Document 7 **shows** Voltaire's contempt for priests," you might say instead, "Voltaire **held** priests in utter contempt (Doc. 7)."