**The Literary Present Tense**

Literary characters and the fictional events concerning them exist in an eternally present state. In other words, every time anyone opens a particular book to a particular page and reads a particular paragraph, the same events will always be occurring and the characters will always be doing the same thing. Therefore, when writing about fictional events or literature, one should always use the present tense, known in this case as the literary present tense.

Always consider the following rules when deciding what verb tense to use in papers:

1. Use the **literary present tense** when writing about the events in a text or the actions of a text whether it is a work of fiction, poetry, or nonfiction literature.

Norton Juster’s *The Phantom Tollbooth* **follows** Milo as he **travels** through the Kingdom of Wisdom and **meets** the various colorful characters that **reside** there.

1. Use the **past tense** when writing about historical events even if said historical events involve the author of a text or historical details about the text itself.

Shel Silverstein **published** his first collection of poems, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, in 1974. The 2004 30th Anniversary Edition of the book **introduced** 12 new poems.

1. Use the **present tense** when writing about an author’s statements or arguments in texts including essays, articles, books, etc.

In the opening of his essay “Here Is a Lesson in Creative Writing,” Kurt Vonnegut **argues** that one should not use semicolons because they are "transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing."

1. As a result of the above rules and situations, it may be necessary to use **both present and past tense** when writing about literature.

William Faulkner **was** more than likely inspired by his own personal experiences in a New Orleans artists’ community when writing his second novel, *Mosquitoes*. In the novel, a group of young artists **embark** on a yachting excursion which **begins** and **ends** in the Big Easy.

**Practice Using Correct Verb Tenses to Write about Literature**

Choose the correct verb tense to correctly refer to the textual and historical information in the examples below:

1. “The Yellow Wallpaper” (explores, explored) a woman’s descent into madness.
2. E. E. Cummings (writes, wrote) *The Enormous Room* while imprisoned in France.
3. In Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use,” Dee and her family (have, had) a disagreement over some family heirloom quilts.
4. In the poem “If,” Rudyard Kipling directly (addresses, addressed) his son.
5. Neil Gaiman’s *Smoke and Mirrors* (is, was) published in 1998 and (contains, contained) both short stories and poems.
6. In “Don’t Blame the Eater,” David Zinczenko (claims, claimed) that lack of alternatives to fast food and lack of nutrition information on fast food are to blame for American obesity and its adverse health effects.
7. After he (learns, learned) that his father was murdered by his uncle, Hamlet (vows, vowed) revenge.
8. In her extended essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf (uses, used) a fictional narrator and story to discuss feminist ideas and issues.
9. Dr. Seuss’s Lorax (speaks, spoke) for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.
10. In one of his famous quotes, Lao Tzu (explains, explained) that “the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”