



## The Use of Verb Tenses in Academic Writing

This guide presents a number of different sets of examples; read through it and try to find the set that seems most appropriate to your situation.

A. First, here are some general principles.

1. Use past tense to narrate past events.
  - President Wilson hoped for vindication in the upcoming election.
2. Use present or present progressive to write about things happening now.
  - The war intensifies daily.
  - The situation is worsening by the hour.
3. Use present tense to state general truths or habitual action.
  - Two physical bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time.
  - We long for final answers.

B. When you're writing about literature, some special conventions apply. Most of these involve what we call the "literary present," the idea that fiction exists in a timeless world properly described in the present tense. Such conventions apply to discussion of theme, plot, or authorial intent.

- In *The Color Purple* Alice Walker shows the lasting affection between two women.
- In *The Crucible* John Proctor decides to die rather than tarnish his reputation.
- Pope satirizes the frivolity of a privileged society.

At times, you may need to use other tenses to help clarify complex chronological relationships.

- Even though Claudius earlier killed Hamlet's father, he now expects few problems from the young prince.

C. When you're writing about history, some different principles apply.

1. As a general rule, most of what you say in history papers will be narrative couched in some form of the past tense.
2. This principle applies to thoughts as well as actions.
  - Many progressives, who thought well of Wilson's dreams of a new world order, drew back in revulsion when the terms of the treaty were published.

Accordingly (revisiting an earlier example), in a history essay you'd likely not talk about Pope's timeless literary intent, but about specific things he said or did in a real time and place.

- Pope satirized the frivolity of a privileged society.

3. In general, reserve the present tense for presenting opinions current among historians today.

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

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