

VERB TENSES: WRITING ABOUT FICTION AND NON-FICTION

How to choose the appropriate verb tense

FICTION: NOVELS, SHORT STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS:

- The **events** in fiction are **made up**: they never actually happened. They ‘happen’ every time someone reads the story. For this reason, they are described in the **present tense**.
 - “The character meets an old man who feeds him and helps him recover.”
- BUT— when mentioning **events** that happened at an **earlier time**, switch to the **past tense**.
 - “The narrator tells his friend what happened many years earlier.”
- If you are referring to the **author’s style** or use of literary devices, use the **present tense**:
 - “The author uses simple words but creates effective descriptions.”
- If you are referring to **real-life events connected to a work of fiction**, use the **past tense**:
 - “Singh wrote the novel in the late 1930s and published it in 1940.”

NON-FICTION: ESSAYS, ARTICLES, BIOGRAPHIES, AND TEXTBOOKS

- The **events** or experiences mentioned in non-fiction are **real** ones—things that actually happened in life—so they are referred to in the **past tense**.
 - “Ottoni visited Asia, travelled widely, and observed local customs.”
- BUT— **facts** that are **still true** or situations still in effect are referred to in the **present tense**:
 - “The writer mentions that dolphins are mammals and breathe air.”
- When referring the **writer’s idea**, use the **present tense**:
 - “The writer describes . . .” “She refers to . . .” “She implies . . .”
- When referring to the **author’s style** or use of rhetorical devices, use the **present tense**:
 - “Perez uses convincing examples, and her language is clear.”

For more help in language skills, contact the Academic Skills Centre.