



Switching It Up: Tense and Point of View

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Tenses

Tense is important in poetry and prose. It impacts the reader experience and determines how you write the piece.

- Past Tense: Events have already happened. Example: “She *danced* in the garden.” Or, “She *had danced* in the garden.”
- Present Tense: Events are happening right now. Example: “She *dances* in the garden.” Or, “She *is dancing* in the garden.”
- Future Tense: Events haven’t happened yet. Example: “She *will dance* in the garden.” Or, “She *will be dancing* in the garden.”

Using past tense

Past tense is, without a doubt, the most common tense that writers default to. It’s also the easiest to slip into accidentally. Lots of contemporary fiction is written in the past tense, and it’s especially favoured in genre fiction. It’s often used to give a sense of reflective distance from the events being narrated, making it ideal for storytelling that is rich and detailed and is most commonly paired with an omniscient narrator.

Writing in the past tense gives readers a vantage point of experience, allowing them to explore characters and past events with a bird’s-eye view.

Why is past tense useful?

Narrative control: Since past tense narrates events that have already taken place, it can help both the writer and the reader feel more in control. The past tense assures readers that the events are resolved, and gives the writer the opportunity to delve into deeper world-building as the narrative voice has more potential context available.

Reflection and history: Past tense creates a narrative space that allows for deep introspection and reflection on the world’s history. The usage of past tense provides a mirror to view and reflect upon these events, enhancing the overall narrative depth.

Backstory and context: Past tense is an excellent vehicle for delivering backstory or historical context. It can significantly contribute to character development, offering precious insights into a character's past decisions and the experiences that shaped them.

Time manipulation: The past tense allows you to compress or expand the way you represent time in your story. For example, an entire year can be summed up in a few sentences if it's not relevant to your story, or a single moment can be drawn out over pages.

Using present tense

As opposed to past tense, writing in the present tense provides a sense of immediacy to any story. It brings readers straight into the pulse of the action, creating an atmosphere of direct participation.

To a reader, events are happening in real-time, fostering a sense of connection and involvement in the story. Present tense is especially popular in young adult fiction and crime or thriller genres, and is usually written in the first person.

Why is present tense useful?

A sense of immediacy: Present tense gives readers the feeling that they are witnessing the events at the same moment as the characters are experiencing them.

Connect with characters: The present tense can help establish a direct bond between the reader and the characters. Readers are more likely to feel invested in characters' lives and actions if they share the experience.

Driving action: The present tense can be an excellent choice for narratives heavy on action or unfolding drama. The immediacy of the present tense can contribute to a heightened sense of tension and urgency.

Character-driven storytelling: Present tense is particularly suitable for exploring a character's consciousness or internal thoughts. It allows you to delve into the character's mind and present thoughts, feelings, and reactions as they happen.

Using Future Tense

Books written in future tense are incredibly rare, but it can be a really useful way to represent a point of view switch. By its nature, future tense is used for indicating events that have not yet occurred and creates an atmosphere of anticipation and suspense that is especially useful for foreshadowing.

Why is future tense useful?

Foreshadowing: Foreshadowing serves to build anticipation, create suspense, and engage the reader's curiosity. By planting seeds for upcoming plot developments, you can encourage readers to make connections and predictions, enhancing their engagement with the narrative.

Building suspense: By indicating something that will happen in the future, you can add a sense of suspense and uncertainty to your narrative, keeping your readers on their toes. Is it prophecy, assumption, or simply a character's overactive imagination?

Show character intentions: Future tense can be used to describe a character's intentions or plans giving insight into their mindset and goals. It can also be a great way to show character development as those intentions change as they learn and grow.

Evolving the narrative: Future tense can introduce changes or developments in a storyline. It alerts readers to important shifts that are on the horizon and can help signpost time skips.

Mixing Tenses

While it's essential to maintain consistency in tense usage throughout your narrative, there are instances where you can switch tenses. Mixing tenses, if done correctly, can make your stories incredibly deep and rich, and give your characters unique narrative voices.

There are lots of examples of mixed tenses in published works, especially when chapters are told from a different character's perspective at different periods of time. A.S. Byatt's novel, *Possession*, for instance, has a split-time focus. The main narrative is told in the past tense by an omniscient narrator, while the sections focused on the past are often written in the present tense, first-person, in the form of letters.

Another example of mixed tense within a single narrative is Ted Chiang's novella, *Story of Your Life*. Chiang seamlessly mixes both past and future tenses with a first-person narrative voice to show the non-linear time that his main character experiences.

Why is mixing tenses useful?

Backstory or flashbacks: If you're writing in the present tense and need to refer to something that happened prior, switch to the past tense. This transition from present to past is a commonly accepted way to insert a flashback or give some backstory.

Foreshadowing: If your narrative is set in the present or past tense, and you want to indicate something that will happen in the future, shift to the future tense for something that will happen. This can help to build suspense or foreshadow events.

Changing perspective: Changing tenses can sometimes signify a change in perspective or narrative voice. Examples might be a character who exists at a different time from the protagonist, or when writing documents in epistolary fiction.

Mixing tenses is common, and there's no reason you shouldn't do it, proving your transitions are smooth and logical. Make sure you're mixing tenses for a purpose and that it benefits the story.

Writing tenses isn't as difficult as it may first seem. We use tenses every day naturally as part of speech. While consistency is key when maintaining narrative voice, it's important to remember

that you can play around with tense for interesting narrative effect. Whatever you do, just make sure you choose the option that best serves your story.

By Pamela Koehne-Drube

Switching Tenses

Most writers, it seems, prefer one tense over another. Many of us use the past tense as our default, as it allows for foreshadowing, and, conversely, it allows reflection from the present “telling” moment. We’re telling a story of which we know the narrative arc and, therefore, it happened in the past. The past tense just feels right.

The present tense, while lacking the ability to use reflection, often carries with it a level of energy precisely because the reader and the narrator are in the moment together. I know nothing more than you, the writer is implicitly saying to the reader, let’s go through this adventure together. There’s a reason that many young adult novels are written in the present tense. They put the reader right into the action of the story.

What can happen to your fiction if you change the tense of a piece? If instead of writing the piece in the past, you write it in the present? What can you learn about your characters or their situation or the way your fiction works by changing the tense? This can be a great thing to play with, if only for a writing session or two. How do things change when we move to the present or the past?

Exercises

1. If your piece is written in the past tense, **rewrite the first paragraph/stanza or two in the present tense**. Look at the sections side by side. Notice how verbs carry more energy. What have you lost? What have you gained? How do the sentences work differently?
2. If your piece is written in the present tense, **rewrite the first paragraph/stanza or two in the past tense**. Look at the sections side by side. How has this changed the tenor of the paragraph? How does it impact the way a reader is introduced to the fiction? Does this affect the point-of-view?
3. **For both 1) and 2), rewrite the paragraph in its original tense, but try to hold onto anything that you liked when you changed the tense**. If present tense gave the section more energy, think of other ways to tighten up your language. If past tense gave you the opportunity to look back from afar, consider opening with a retrospective and then segueing into present tense.
4. If you like the energy of the present tense but want to write in the past tense, consider using more literary devices that allow you to stay in the present moment. Dialogue is one of those. While the tags belong to the past or the present tense, the dialogue itself is always in the moment. Letters and other documents work in a similar fashion.

by Laura Spence-Ash

Point of View

Overview

Point of view (POV) impacts how the piece moves, how characters or narrator changes occur, what details are included in the piece, and how the reader experiences the work. Poetry and prose utilize POV and choosing which POV to incorporate can often be challenging.

First person: I, we

Second person: you

Third person: he/she/it/they

Switching Point of View

To switch point of view (POV) in writing, use structural breaks like chapter breaks or scene or stanza breaks (often marked by a line of asterisks or blank lines), and signal the change by establishing the new character's thoughts or actions immediately in the new section. Avoid "headhopping"—rapid, unannounced shifts—as it confuses readers. The switch should serve a purpose, like revealing different facets of the story, and should be handled with care for a seamless reader experience.

Methods for Switching POVs

Chapter breaks: A new chapter is a standard and clear way to indicate a POV change, especially if you plan to spend a significant amount of time with the new character.

Scene breaks: Use a typographical symbol, such as a line of asterisks (***) or extra blank lines to create a visual break and signal a switch to a new character or scene.

Line or stanza breaks: A simple line break can also be used, but it's crucial to follow it with immediate confirmation of the new POV.

POV Key Considerations for Success

Clarity: Readers need to know when and where the POV changes. The shift should be abrupt and unmistakable.

Purpose: Have a clear narrative reason for the switch. It should advance the plot, reveal more about characters, or provide a new perspective on events.

Immediate Identification: As soon as the perspective changes, make it clear which character's head the reader is in. Use details like their thoughts, actions, or a direct reference to their name.

Consistency: Be consistent with the POV you choose for each section or chapter.

Avoid "Headhopping": Rapidly changing perspectives within a single scene or paragraph without clear breaks is known as "headhopping" and is confusing for the reader.

Tips for a Seamless Transition

End with a "Gilligan Cut": To ease a transition, the previous POV character can wonder what the other character is doing right now, creating a natural bridge to the next scene.

Stylistic Differences: You can use a distinctly different prose style, tone, or even formatting (like italics) for a brief interlude from a different perspective to make the change obvious.

Think Like a Reader: Consider the reader's experience. Will they understand why you made this shift? Will they get lost or confused? The goal is to make the experience immersive and seamless.

Exercises

1. If your piece is written in first or third person, **rewrite a paragraph or stanza in second person**. Note how the piece moves differently, how characters or narrator changes occur. Note how the reader might experience these changes.
2. If your piece is written in third or second person, **rewrite a paragraph or stanza in first person**. Are there now limitations? What might the reader experience be?
3. If your piece is written in first or second person, **rewrite a paragraph or stanza in third person**. How does this change details you decide to include in the piece? Why does that occur?
4. Compare all versions. Which do you like best? Have someone else read them. Which does your reader prefer and why?

Sources: Jami Gold, Reddit, Katherine Gotthardt