

Play Time: Literally Play with Time

The Challenge

Most stories move forward in a straight, predictable line—past to present to future. But time in storytelling doesn't have to behave. It can stretch a single second into eternity. It can loop back on itself. It can fracture, distort, rewind, or collapse entirely.

Your task is to write a story, play, or scene where time is manipulated—bent, broken, slowed, reversed, or repeated in a way that enhances meaning. Maybe a character sees their entire life flash before their eyes in a single moment. Maybe time speeds up without them realizing, leaving them lost in their own future. Maybe the past and future bleed into each other, making it impossible to tell which is which. However you approach it, time must not behave normally.

Guidelines

- **Slow It Down** – Expand a single instant across a whole page. Linger in the details. What happens when time refuses to move forward?
- **Speed It Up** – Let hours, years, or entire lifetimes pass in a sentence. What is lost when time races ahead?
- **Break the Sequence** – Maybe the story begins at the end and ends at the beginning. Maybe time jumps unpredictably, or only moves forward when a character makes a choice.
- **Blend Past, Present, and Future** – How does memory distort time? How do we experience the past as if it were still happening?
- **Make It Matter** – Time is not just a gimmick. It should **change the way the story is understood**.

Questions to Consider

- What effect does the time manipulation have on the reader's understanding of the story?
- How does time distortion reflect the emotions or psychology of the characters?
- Is time working **against** the character, or are they controlling it?
- If the past and present exist at once, what does that mean for fate, regret, or inevitability?

Model Works & Inspiration

- **"Bullet in the Brain"** (*Tobias Wolff*) – A story that expands a single moment into an entire lifetime of memory.
- **"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"** (*Ambrose Bierce*) – A story where time slows, bends, and ultimately deceives both the reader and protagonist.
- **Slaughterhouse-Five** (*Kurt Vonnegut*) – A novel where time becomes unstuck, forcing the protagonist to experience his life out of order.
- **Memento** (2000, Film) – A film that tells a story **backward**, making time manipulation an essential part of understanding the plot.
- **Arrival** (2016, Film, based on *Story of Your Life* by *Ted Chiang*) – A narrative where past, present, and future all exist simultaneously, reshaping meaning.