

Should You Write Fiction in Present Tense?

Yes, fiction writers can indeed write in the present tense, which can bring a sense of immediacy to your story.

That doesn't mean writing in the present tense will be easy. It will in fact be harder than writing in the traditional past tense.

I read up on present tense versus past tense and found some helpful tips in the Gotham Writers Workshop Writing Fiction book. I quote this segment, page 99-100:

Writers occasionally try to narrow this time distance by telling the story in the present tense, as Margaret Atwood did in her novel "Surfacing": "He feels me watching him and lets go of my hand then he takes his gun out, bundling it in the silver wrapper, and sticks it in the ashtray and crosses his arms. This means I'm not supposed to observe him, I face front."

Does this sound more immediate to you? Well, yes, and that's the intent. But because past tense has been a convention of fiction for so long, most readers now find its use invisible.

Formally quite unusual, present tense doesn't upset many soup bowls anymore.

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Sometimes a writer specifies that the events of the story took place long ago, grading a substantial time distance. When this occurs, the reader may feel that the story is changed with nostalgia or that the account may be in some other way suspect, memory having been eroded over time. The distance is striking in George Eliot story "The Lifted Veil" which begins: "The time of my end approaches. I have lately been subject to attacks of angina pectoralis and in the ordinary course of things, my physician tells me, I may fairly hope that my life will not be protracted many months."

The narrator goes on to reflect on the span of his lifetime. He tells us, "My childhood perhaps seems happier to me than it really was, in contrast to all the after years." Several pages later he's leaped ahead to describe his young adulthood. "At basic, we were joined by my brother Alfred, now a handsome self-confident man of six and 20, a thorough contrast to my fragile nervous ineffectual self."

In an instance like this, when the reader is aware that the story's events occurred long ago, the emotion of urgency and suspense of the story may be diminished. In Elliot's story, we know the narrator is about to die — there's no hope of a different outcome to the story's events. But this kind of time distance allows the narrator to tell the story with an interesting perspective often fusing emotions of both the past and the present.

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Mark's back. This 300-page book is handy, packed with tips examples and anecdotes cheat sheets, that cover most of the structure of a fiction book. It was published in 2003, and has evergreen advice. I found it for a dollar in my library's used book shop after one of our authors meetings.

—mark mathes

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