

**The Right Tense for Sense: Using the Literary Present**

Does the action in the following sentence take place in the present or in the past?

Taehee gives me the dog and jogged across the street.

The answer is not really clear, because the tenses are inconsistent. The first verb in the sentence, *gives*, is in the present tense. The second verb, *jogged*, is in the past tense. To achieve consistency of tense, both verbs should be in either the present or the past tense.

**PRESENT TENSE:** Taehee gives me the dog and jogs across the street.

**PAST TENSE:** Taehee gave me the dog and jogged across the street.

Using tenses inconsistently is nonstandard usage. For papers and written reports, use standard English usage.

**NONSTANDARD:** Pound wrote the *Cantos* and mails them to his publisher. [*Wrote* is in the past tense; *mails* is in the present tense.]

**STANDARD:** Pound **wrote** the *Cantos* and **mailed** them to his publisher. [Both verbs are in the past tense.]

**NONSTANDARD:** He sets his pen down and stared at the poem. [*Sets* is in the present tense; *stared* is in the past tense.]

**STANDARD:** He **sets** his pen down and **stares** at the poem. [Both verbs are in the present tense.]

You should use the present tense to summarize the plot or subject matter of a work of literature or to refer to a writer's relationship to his or her work. This use of the present tense is called the **literary present**.

Cummings's "what if a much of a which of a wind" **portrays** the durability of the human spirit.

Moore **fills** her poem with many interesting ideas.

You should use the literary present in most instances when writing about what takes place in a literary work. However, when you are writing about events the characters themselves describe in the past tense, use the past tense in your description.

In Stevens's poem, the speaker recalls how he or she **placed** a jar on a hill.

**Exercise Maintaining Consistency of Tense and Using the Literary Present**

Rewrite each of the following sentences according to the directions given in brackets. Unless you are directed otherwise, all sentences should maintain consistency of tense.

**EXAMPLE:** The river-merchant's wife was wary of her husband but eventually grows to love him. [*Use the past tense.*]

The river-merchant's wife was wary of her husband but eventually grew to love him.

1. In Williams's poem the wheels of a truck rumbled down the street. [*Use the literary present.*]

2. Sandburg's Chicago was both fierce and cunning. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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3. In Pound's poem, the speaker remembers that she never laughs because she was shy. *[Use the literary present for the first verb and the past tense for the second.]*  
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4. White chickens stood beside a wheelbarrow that was soaked with rain. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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5. The figure 5 moves through the streets, and its siren howled. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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6. The city of the big shoulders is wicked and crooked when the poem is written. *[Use the past tense.]*  
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7. A jar was placed on a hill and made the wilderness rise up and surround the hill. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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8. The jar was gray and plain, yet it changed its environment. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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9. In Pound's poem, the husband drags his feet when he left. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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10. As the speaker waits for her husband's return, she grew older. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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11. The teacher reads "what if a much of a which of a wind" to us, but we have a hard time understanding it at first. *[Use the past tense.]*  
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12. In the poem "Chicago," Sandburg referred to Chicago as the world's hog butcher. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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13. Williams was a doctor who writes poems that portrayed common events. *[Use the past tense for the second verb and the literary present for the third.]*  
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14. I liked the Cummings poem that asked questions about a metaphorical wind. *[Use the past tense for the first verb and the literary present for the second.]*  
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15. In "Poetry," Moore elaborated on her ideas about what poets should do. *[Use the literary present.]*  
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**One-Stop Planner CD-ROM and  
Workshop Resources print ancillaries  
include Answer Key here.**

**Answers are not available Online.**