Writing Handout L-6: 
The Literary Present

Write about literature in the present tense unless you are using a direct quote or writing about actual events that happened in the past (see Example 1).

When you refer to the events in a story (as in a plot summary), you should use "the literary present" tense. Write as if the events in the literary work are happening now.

Example 1

Ernest Hemingway wrote The Old Man and the Sea during the early 1950’s when he lived in Cuba. In the story, Hemingway explains that the old fisherman "no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach.”

Here, “wrote” and “lived” are in the past tense because they refer to actual events that occurred in the past; “dreamed” is left in the past tense since it is a direct quote. However, “explains” appears in a statement about Hemingway's writing, so it is in the present tense.

To avoid a confusing shift in tense, a possible revision could read as follows:

In the story, Hemingway explains that the old fisherman dreams no more “of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife.” He dreams only “of places now and of the lions on the beach.”

Example 2

Past (incorrect): Fearful of the battle that he heard in the distance, Robert Jordan awoke and held Maria tightly, “as though to expel the fear from his troubled soul.”

Literary Present (correct): Hearing the distant battle and becoming fearful, Robert Jordan awakes and holds Maria tightly, “as though to expel the fear from his troubled soul.”

Summary

When you read a literary work, consider the events as though they are currently happening; when you write your essay about a literary work, think of the work as if you are currently speaking to the writer. See Example 3 as a sample of a writer using the literary present for an analysis of a short story.
Example 3

Adapted from “An Explication of a Passage in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ ” by Dr. Charles Croghan, Indian River State College English Department.

Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” opens with a nameless, first-person narrator telling the story of how he murdered* an old man. The narrator explains that his reason for telling the tale is to prove that he is not insane. Poe indicates in the first lines of the story that the narrator is insane; however, the madness is revealed only when the reader comes to the speaker’s account of his preparations for the murder.

As the narrator details his preparations for the murder, the meticulous planning provides the reader with evidence of insanity. One example is the speaker’s exact schedule for spying: “every night at midnight.” All of the careful preparations that the speaker explains in detail to prove his sanity serve only to convince the reader that he is mad.

In still another of his assumptions, the speaker shows that he is madly “logical” or operating on the logic of a dream. There seems to be a dream-like relationship between his dark lantern “all closed, closed,* so that no light shone* out,” and the sleeping victim. When the mad man opens his lantern so that it emits a single ray, he is hoping that the old man’s head will be open,* too.

By taking such great pains and practicing this nightly ritual, the speaker demonstrates that what he perceives as evidence of his sanity is actually just the opposite. His logic and words prove self-defeating.

*Note: Logic dictates use of past or future tenses in some situations, especially in quotes.