SHIFTS IN TIME

WHAT IS A SHIFT IN TIME?

Every verb has a tense (or a time frame in which the action takes place). Common tenses are past, present, and future: walk, walked, will walk. Avoid unnecessarily shifting the time frame of your writing. For instance, the verbs in a piece of writing should not randomly change from past tense to present tense, and vice versa.

INCORRECT: He walked into the house and opened the fridge. Suddenly, he realizes he is not alone.

CORRECT: He walked into the house and opened the fridge. Suddenly, he realized he was not alone.

Many stories happen in the past tense; however, a writer may choose to relate events in the present tense to create the feeling that events are happening at that moment. This is fine, as long it remains consistent.

CORRECT: He walks into the house and opens the fridge. Suddenly, he realizes he is not alone.

ACCEPTABLE SHIFTS

Sometimes it is acceptable and necessary to switch tenses. For instance, ongoing facts will be in present tense and completed past actions will be in past tense (even in the same paragraph or sentence). In many cases a cue is present indicating that tenses are temporarily changing; this is, however, not always necessary.

In the following example, notice how "is" is present tense because it is discussing an ongoing fact. "died" is past tense because it is discussing a completed past action. The cue, in this instance, is "last year."

ACCEPTABLE SHIFT: Drunk driving is the leading cause of automobile accidents. Last year, more than 16,000 people died as a result of drunk driving.

NOVELS AND IDEAS IN ESSAYS

When discussing events in a novel or ideas in an essay, use the present tense, even if the author is deceased or the action is set and completed in the distant past.

EXAMPLES:

Hamlet **rejects** Ophelia because he believes she **is deceiving** him. (notice how the sentence is in the present tense)

In the essay "Shooting an Elephant," George Orwell **describes** his experience as an officer in British occupied Burma.