



- Universal truths are expressed in the present tense.

We eat to live.

### SHIFTING TENSES

Verb tenses usually create problems when we are talking about the base tense of a piece of prose. The base tense is determined by the point in time from which the writer is speaking. When you are writing about events in a novel or movie, or when you are speaking about an historical event, you may talk about these actions as if they are occurring now (base tense is present) **OR** you may talk about these actions as if they occurred in the past (base tense is past). Either is correct.

Hamlet **meets** his father's ghost. (**present tense**)

Hamlet **met** his father's ghost. (**past tense**)

The important thing about the **base tense** is that it must **remain consistent** throughout a paper. If you choose to write as if a novel or an historical event is happening now, stay in the present tense. If your point of view is that the event is over and done with, stay in the past tense. **DO NOT** talk about the event as "present" in one paragraph and then, in the next sentence or paragraph, talk about it as "past."

#### INCORRECT TENSE SHIFT:

When the play **opens**, Hamlet **is** deep in despair. He **contemplates** suicide. He **wants** to  
 (present) (present) (present) (present)  
 leave Denmark. Then the ghost **appeared**, and Hamlet **was inspired** with an intense  
 (past) (past)  
 desire to avenge his father's death.

**PLEASE NOTE: Consistency is demanded only of the base tense of a paper.**

Your basic knowledge of the way tenses work in English will tell you that you will switch tenses when the time frame of the action requires such switches.

#### CORRECT TENSE SHIFTS:

In Act 1 Hamlet **remembers** what a noble man his father **was** (old Hamlet is dead when the play begins).

Attitudes **change** slowly. During the past six centuries women **have been treated** as chattels of their fathers or husbands. In the nineteenth century, women **fought** for the right to own property. Today, women **can own** property, but they **are** still **fighting** for full equality. If an ERA amendment **is ever passed**, women **will be** closer to this goal.