

SHIFTS IN VERB TENSE

Verb tense establishes the time frame in which an action (or a series of actions) take place (see handout VERB TENSES for details). When a passage begins in one tense and shifts to another tense without any reason, readers get confused.

Consider the following:

Portnoy spotted the young, slender woman in the tight slacks as she hails a cab. He approaches her and asked her for a date. At first, she snubbed him but abruptly changes her mind and says yes. She told Portnoy her name was Mary Jane but that everyone calls her the Monkey. They went up to her apartment and have a tryst.

The writer has no reason to switch back and forth between present tense and past because all the action occurs in the same time frame. This passage must be revised by making all the verbs either present or past tense, depending on the writer's preference. Present tense makes the action more immediate; past tense makes it more distant.

A little oddity: when relating incidents that happen in **works of literature** (as support for a literary paper, for example), we use the present tense: *When Dr. Frankenstein creates the monster, he cannot imagine the bloodshed that he will unleash.* However, when we refer to the time a piece of literature was written, we use the present tense: *Shelley wrote Frankenstein in 1818.*

Sometimes, verb shifts are necessary. Consider the following sentence: the first verb expresses a general truth (for which the present tense is appropriate), the second relates an action that occurred in the past (and is thus expressed in past tense).

Many people think that “Frankenstein” is the name of the monster because they skipped reading the book.

► Did you like the sample sentences? Get the whole story in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.