

When you were young, English teachers may have told you to stick to one tense: 'Write using the past tense!' or 'Write using the present tense; don't switch between past, present and future.' For the most part, this is correct. However, good writers will sometimes change tenses for effect.

Task one: Read the following passages, looking out for changes of tense (note, not all passages switch between tenses). You might find it helpful to highlight the changes in tense as you come across them:

Passage one

Alison was scared. She slowly placed one foot in front of the other and edged forward. Her mind was confused. She had found out that her best friend had betrayed her. Her future was at the best bad, at the worst terrible. She wept as she crept along the narrow bridge.

Passage two

Alison was scared. Slowly placing one foot in front of the other she edges along the narrow bridge. She had found that her best friend betrayed her. Now her prospects were bad, if not terrible. She weeps as she takes her next step.

Passage three

Scared, Alison placed one foot in front of the other and edged her way along the narrow bridge. One wrong step would mean death. Finding that her best friend had betrayed her had devastated Alison. Weeping she takes another step. She had to go on.

Passage four

Alison was terrified. She stood frozen with fear. The platform led to a narrow bridge. She needed to cross it.

One step at a time she makes the journey. Each step is a gamble with death. Each step is accompanied by the racing drum beat of her heart. Each step is distance between her and her enemies.

As she took the last step the bridge behind her crumbled and fell. She was safe.

Task 2: Now think about the four passages you have read. What effect does this 'mixing' of tenses have on the writing? Which passage do you think is best?

Task 3: The next two passages showcase something different. Can you see what is different about the writing? As before, can you highlight the changes in tense and discuss their effect?

Passage five

I couldn't go on. Exhaustion had chained my body to the spot. But the desire to survive pulls me forward. Crawling on hands and knees I move along the corridor. I can see the door ahead. Pain washes over me. Ten feet. Five feet. Then the door opened and I saw him.

Passage six

I struggled to my feet. I am not going to die on my knees. I am not going to give him the satisfaction. Pain cut like a razor through my thigh muscle, but I would not let him see my weakness.

(Note: some people like to put inverted commas around thoughts like this or use italics when typing.)

Task 4: Look back at something you have written in the past tense. Is there a sentence or two that would be better if it was changed into the present tense? This is not a technique to over use, but it can make your action seem more immediate and faster paced.

Suggested answers

- ❖ Passage one only uses the past tense.
- ❖ Passage two, however, uses two sentences in the present tense.
- ❖ Passage three uses the participles 'finding' and 'weeping', the conditional modal verb 'would' and the present tense verb 'takes'.
- ❖ Passage four takes a different approach: a whole paragraph is written in the present tense. This is a technique that should only be used very rarely as dramatic effect will be lost if it is overused and the writing will feel repetitive.
- ❖ With regard to passages five and six, using the present tense can add immediacy and pace. It can also make writing feel more exciting. It can be used when you are writing in the first person as well as the third.
- ❖ The present tense can also be used in first person narratives to suggest someone talking to themselves. You may wish to punctuate this kind of 'thought writing' with inverted commas or italics.