Writing about Literature:
Verb Tenses and Literary Present Tense

Write about history in the past tense; write about literature in the present tense. The assumption is that historical events happened once, but every time somebody reads a literary work, the event being described happens again at that moment.

For example, it is correct to write, “The Brazilian author Paulo Coelho was born in 1947 in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Before he dedicated his life completely to literature, he worked as theatre director and actor, lyricist and journalist.” These are historical events that happened one time in the past. When you write about events in Coelho’s novel *The Alchemist*, however, you will write in the literary present tense. For example, “Santiago finds (not found) his treasure in Andalusia.” The same rule applies when you discuss the author’s technique. For example, “Coelho begins (not began) the novel with Santiago’s recurring dream about treasure, an example of the type of event Joseph Campbell describes (not described) as The Call in his hero’s journey model.”

The exception occurs when you are referring to events that happened prior to the action of the literary work, or prior to the part of the literary work you are considering. For example, you cannot say “Santiago learns to read at a seminary” because that happens years before the action of the narrative in the novel starts. In that case, use the past perfect tense: “Santiago had learned to read at a seminary when he was a young boy.” It would also be a little odd to use the present tense if you are clearly referring back to an earlier part of the work; in that case, use the present perfect: “By the time Santiago reaches the pyramids, he has learned everything he needs to know from his mentor, the Alchemist.”

**Practice:** Fill in the blank(s) in each sentence by selecting a verb from the word bank and using the correct tense of that verb to complete each sentence.

Most of our information about the Trojan War _______ from *The Iliad* of Homer, which _____ the earliest surviving epic poem from Western literature. Homer ___ a wandering bard, who _____ his poems in eighth century B.C.E., over 2700 years ago. He _______ and _______ stories of Greek heroes and gods dating back to the Mycenaean era, some 500 years before his time. He would _______ for about 3 hours each night for a week, and then _______ on to another town. Greece _______ no written language then, so this oral tradition _______ the only way for stories to be passed on; nobody _______ who first _______ down his stories, or when—it may _______ 200 years after his death. *The Iliad* _______ the story of the great Greek warrior Achilles and his part in the war. Achilles _______ the Trojan prince Hector because Hector _______ his friend Patroclus.
Verb Word Bank:
To Chant
To Come
To Kill
To Write
To Tell
To Know
To Have
To Murder
To Move
To Perform
To Be (x4)
To Recite
To Memorize