

Getting Tense about Verbs

General rules:

1. Events occurring inside the literary text are always happening right now, so use present tense.
2. Events occurring outside the literary text either happened in the past (so use past tense) or are happening right now (so use present tense).

Complicating factors:

1. Even if an author is long dead and thus no longer capable of wielding a pen, it is acceptable to use present-tense verbs to introduce quoted material (“she writes,” “he states”).
2. If you need to refer to events occurring at different time frames within a work of literature, you may indicate prior events with “has” or “had” and future events with “will.”

These examples are all correct. Can you figure out why?

Zora Neale Hurston **wrote** *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston **writes**, “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board.”

Hurston **mixed** up a big batch of fact and fiction when she wrote her autobiography.

Hurston’s autobiography **mixes** fact and fiction.

Hurston **appealed** to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings for help in finding a new publisher.

Hurston’s works **appeal** to many types of readers today.

Zora Neale Hurston **got married** several times but didn’t stay married for long.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie **marries** three times. While still **married** to Logan Killicks, she **elopes** with Jody Starks, but only after Jody’s death does she **marry** Tea Cake, who **has been courting** her for some time. It looks as if she **will stay married** to Tea Cake forever, but then disaster intervenes. In the end, she **looks** back over all the men she **had married** but **resolves** to continue living alone.

For a more complete discussion, see Lucy Ferriss on *Lingua Franca*:

1. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2012/09/19/time-present-part-1/>
2. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2012/09/28/time-present-part-2/>