

The Literary Present

In general, when writing about literature, you should use the present tense because the literature lives on even after you have finished reading it. When you use the present tense to narrate a story, you are using what is known as the literary present. The following is an example of the literary present:

Because Elie witnesses such unspeakable cruelty, he begins to lose his faith in God.

Does this mean that you should never use the past tense in literary analysis? No, it does not. The past tense has its place. Use it when you want to show that one action happens prior to another action:

At the end of the story, Elie realizes that he is no longer the devout child who studied the holy books so hungrily in Sighet.

Notice that “studied” is in the past tense. That is because the studying takes place *before* the realizing.

Should you do all your school work in the literary present? No. A history paper, for example, should most likely be in past tense since you are more concerned with presenting historical facts than with narrating a story.