



PAST as PRESENT



Using Present Tense to Tell About the Past

A Quick Refresher on Present and Past Tense



Simple Present

"I eat a cheeseburger every day."

Present Progressive

"I am eating a cheeseburger right now."

Present Perfect

"I have just eaten a cheeseburger."

Present Perfect Progressive

"I have been eating this cheeseburger for three hours."

Simple Past:

"I ate a cheeseburger yesterday."

Past Progressive

"I was eating cheeseburgers all day."

Past Perfect

"I had eaten a cheeseburger for lunch."

Past Perfect Progressive

"I had been eating cheeseburgers until dinner."

What is Historical Present?

2006

event that occurred
in the past

narrating



a verb phrase in the present tense
"am eating," "have just eaten"



Use in Narration and Storytelling



Historical present is used like a strong kitchen spice: sparingly. Never stay in it for long, and use it infrequently.

Severe overuse will sound ridiculous.

Switching from past to historical present can add interesting texture, but repetitive switching becomes confusing.



Examples of Historical Present



For drama or urgency

“States Across the Midwest Report Swarms of Giant Chipmunks”

In describing fiction

“In ‘A Tree Grows in Berwyn,’ the main character’s relationship with a waitress becomes the story’s romantic subplot.”



To bring the reader into the action

“It is late last Friday night. My stomach growls, and I remember the pound of fresh ground beef in the fridge. Behind the milk, I know there is some sliced cheese. The stove, mere feet away, beckons. ‘Cheeseburger,’ it whispers.”

In essays and diaries

“In 1987, I was a senior and about to go to prom. I remember it clearly, parading about in a baby blue dress, and posing on the porch for photos.”



In conversation/jokes

“There I am, standing in Produce and holding a potato, and here comes Phyllis from the finance department.”

A Quick Note on Implicature

“The leader of the pirates we met yesterday was named Bob.”

