What If?

GRAPPLING WITH GRAMMAR
Tension with Verb Tenses

There's nothing like relaxing with a good book or short story. But even the most relaxed reader is going to feel a little tense about mixed up verb tenses.

There are two ways to write a story; in the past or in the present. The way you use your verbs determines if the story is set in the past or the present. For example, here is the same line in both past and present tense.

Allison despised getting up early on the weekend but on that particular Saturday she was up and downstairs eating breakfast before anyone else.

Allison despises getting up early on the weekend but on this particular Saturday morning she is up and downstairs eating breakfast before anyone else.

Notice how the verbs change from the past to present. *Despised* becomes *despises* and *was* becomes *is*. The use of the word *that* as opposed to *this* also creates the feeling of past tense. *This* tends to indicate the one at hand right now whereas *that* describes something more distant.

It is important to stick to whatever tense you choose for your story. It is possible to create one scene in a story that is written in the past tense and another scene in the present tense but they have to be clearly separated so as not to confuse your reader and there has to be a point to jumping from past to present. If you jump back and forth without any logical reason your reader will be confused and soon become disinterested.

No matter what your choice of tense you cannot change in the middle of a sentence or a scene.

Jimmy yelled at Bobby as he came around the corner. The last time they had played soccer together Bobby trips him.

Jimmy yells at Bobby as he comes around the corner. Whenever they play soccer together Bobby tripped him.

Notice how the first example is in the past tense until we get to the word *trips*. In order to keep that scene in the past tense *trips* must be changed to *tripped*. In the second example the present tense is used until the word *tripped*. In this case the *tripped* must become *trips* in order to maintain the present tense.

When you jump back and forth between tenses it is not only grammatically incorrect but confusing and frustrating to your reader. A confused and frustrated reader will soon choose something else to read.

If it is necessary to take your reader further back in time you simply make use of the words *has* or *had*. If you are using past tense, tacking the word *had* onto your verbs indicates that you have gone further into the past.

Julie stared at Frank as he crossed the finish line. Something was wrong; Frank had run faster than that in practice.

If you are writing in the present tense and want to take your reader back in time add the word *has* (or its plural form *have*) to your verbs.

Julie stares at Frank as he crosses the finish line. Something is wrong; Frank has run faster than this in practice.

Sharon is worried about the twins. They have always been full of energy when she has babysat them.

This way you can maintain the tense of your story but give your reader a glimpse into the past.

Most readers are comfortable no matter what tense you use to tell your story but they quickly become uncomfortable if you jump all over the place. One of the best ways to catch awkward verb tense changes is to read your story out loud. Practice on your family, your friends or even your cat but proofread your story to catch verbs that might be leaping from past to present or back.