Hi, Bridge students:

For your Bridge project, you will read a short story and then write about it. When you write about a piece of literature, such as a short story, poem, or novel, you should write about what the characters say and the events that happen as if they are happening now. This is called the literary present tense.

The only exception to this is when (1) you are using a direct quote from the story, or (2) you are writing about an event that actually happened in the past.

**Example**

Ernest Hemingway wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* during the early 1950’s when he lived in Cuba. In the story, Hemingway explains that the old fisherman "no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach."

- In the example, “wrote” and “lived” are in the past tense because they refer to actual events that occurred in the past.
- Also, “dreamed” is left in the past tense since it is a direct quote from the story. In other words, it appears as “dreamed” within the story itself.
- However, “explains” is in a statement about Hemingway's writing, so it is in the present tense.

Using all these tenses can be confusing for those reading your essay. It’s best to write as much as you possibly can in the present tense.

Here is a possible revision of the example:

In the story, Hemingway explains that the old fisherman dreams no more “of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife.” He dreams only “of places now and of the lions on the beach.”

**MSDE Standards:**

W.1d Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. This includes editing for shifts in verb tense.

**Activity 1: Using Present Tense**
REVIEW: When writing about characters and events in a story, you should use the present tense. This is called the **literary present tense**.

**Directions:** Below are sentences taken from literary analysis essays written by high school students.

**For each sentence, fill in the blank with the present tense of the verb listed.**

**Example 1**
On their quest, they _______ and are helped by a number of characters. (to meet)
The answer is **meet**. On their quest, they **meet** and are helped by a number of characters.

**Example 2**
The ghost in *Hamlet* _______ Hamlet’s unspoken thoughts. (to reveal)
The answer is **reveals**. The ghost in *Hamlet* **reveals** Hamlet’s unspoken thoughts. (to reveal)

1. When the rain abruptly stops, the children’s minds _______ about the pale face girl in the closet. (to forget)
2. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* _______ many memorable characters. (to showcase)
3. In the story “All Summer in a Day” by Ray Bradbury, on the planet Venus summer _______ out once every seven years for just one hour. (to come)
4. Juliet commits suicide when she _______ that Romeo is dead. (to see)
5. The description of the house _______ a serene, peaceful environment of fruit-bearing walls and creek-inlaid floors. (to evoke)

**Activity 2: Identifying the Incorrect Verb Tense**

REVIEW: All verbs should be written in present tense unless (1) the verb is part of a direct quote from the story or (2) the verb describes a real-life event that actually took place in the
Directions: Below are sentences taken from literary analysis essays written by high school students.

In each sentence below, identify the verb that is not the correct tense.

Example 1

Edgar Allen Poes writes a short story entitled “The Tell-tale Heart” in 1843. The piece talks about the life of an unnamed narrator who is suffering from psychosis and his continued attempt to prove his sanity. Operating from the first person point of view, Poe enables readers to get inside the head of the protagonist and his current battle with nervousness.

A. writes  
B. talks  
C. is suffering  
D. enables

The answer is A. Poe’s writing of the short story is an actual, real-life event that happened in the past. Therefore, “writes” should be “wrote.”

Example 2

A common theme observed in The Odyssey is Odysseus’ change and development as a character; his punishment sprouted from his arrogance and he quickly learns that the gods, not himself, control his fate.

A. observed  
B. sprouted  
C. learns  
D. control

The answer is B. The student is talking about the changes that the character Odysseus makes in the story. Anytime someone writes about a character or what happens in a story, the present tense should be used. “Sprouted” should be “sprouts.”

Now you try: In each sentence below, identify the verb that is not the correct tense.

1. The first paragraph of Alberto Alvaro Rios’s short story “The Secret Lion” presented a twelve-year-old boy’s view of growing up—everything changes. As the narrator informs the reader, when the magician pulls a tablecloth out from under a pile of dishes, children are amazed at the “stay-the-same part,” while adults focus only on the tablecloth itself.

A. focus  
B. are amazed  
C. informs
2. Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel, often published as 1984, is a dystopian novel by English novelist George Orwell. It was published on 8 June 1949 by Secker & Warburg as Orwell's ninth and final book completed in his lifetime. The story was mostly written at Barnhill, a farmhouse on the Scottish island of Jura, at times while Orwell suffered from severe tuberculosis. Thematically, Nineteen Eighty-Four centered on the consequences of government over-reach, totalitarianism, mass surveillance, and repressive regimentation of all persons and behaviours within society.

A. was...written  
B. suffered  
C. centered  
D. is

Hint: The past tense should be used when writing about a real-life event that actually took place in the past, such as an author’s battle with an illness. However, when writing about the story itself, such as the theme of the novel, use the present tense.

3. Fitzgerald went on to say that Gatsby “never knew, nor cared” about the details of that night.

A. went  
B. knew  
C. cared  
D. details

Hint: A direct quote from the story stays in past tense. When introducing an author’s words from a story, use present tense.

4. Jewel achieves the same result; his progress as a character and a human is reversed. At the beginning of the story Jewel is a quiet, intense young man. Very quickly, though, he became palpably bitter at his family, discussing Darl thusly: “Catch him and tie him up...Goddamn it, do you want to wait until he sets fire to the goddamn team and wagon?”

A. catch  
B. became  
C. achieves  
D. is reversed

Hint: When writing about a character or an event from a story, use present tense.

5. In the beginning of Lord of the Flies, the boys viewed the conch as an important symbol that unites them and gives them the power to deal with their difficult situation. When the conch is first found and blown, it brings everyone together: “Ralph found his breath and blew a series of short blasts. Piggy exclaimed, ‘There’s one!’”

A. viewed  
B. blew  
C. found  
D. exclaimed
Activity 3: Using the Correct Verb Tense

REVIEW: When writing about characters and events in a story, you should use the present tense. This is called the literary present tense. The only time you do not use present tense is when

1. A direct quote from the text contains a past tense verb. Keep the verb in past tense!
2. You are writing about actual, real-life events that happened in the past.

Directions: 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.

Example

To Kill a Mockingbird __was published__ (is published/was published) in 1960. Harper Lee, the author, __uses___ (uses/used) a trial to deal with the topic of discrimination against race. Jean Louise, Scout, and Jem __are___ (were/are) the children of a lawyer named Atticus Finch. His daughter Scout __narrates___ (narrates/narrated) the story. In the small town of Maycomb, Alabama, the citizens __are suffering___ (were suffering/are suffering) through the Great Depression.

Now you try. The paragraph below was written by a high school student about The Iliad, a poem by the ancient Greek poet Homer. In the poem, Homer tells the story of the Trojan War, an actual event that took place in ancient history. As you read the student’s paragraph, ask yourself these questions:
Most of our information about the Trojan War ______
came/comes) from The Iliad of Homer, which _____ (is/was) the earliest surviving epic poem from Western literature. The poet Homer ___ (was/is) a wandering bard, who _____
writes/wrote) his poems in eighth century B.C.E., over 2700 years ago. He ______
memorized/memorizes) and ________ (recited/recites) stories of Greek heroes and gods dating back to the Mycenaean era, some 500 years before his time. He would perform for about 3 hours each night for a week, and then ______ (moved/move) on to another town. Greece _______ (has/had) no written language then, so this oral tradition ______ (is/was) the only way for stories to be passed on; nobody ______ (knows/knew) who first ______
wrote/writes) down his stories, or when—it may ______ (has been/have been) 200 years after his death. The Iliad _____ (tells, told) the story of the great Greek warrior Achilles and his part in the war. Achilles ______ (murdered/murders) the Trojan prince Hector because Hector ___________ (killed/killed) his friend Patroclus.