

## Writing and tense (verbs and time)

- Use the tense that is appropriate for the piece of writing.
- Don't shift back and forth between tenses unless there is good reason.
- Use the simple present tense for literary essays or paragraphs. For example, instead of writing, *A Midsummer Night's Dream was a play about errors and mistaken identities that resulted in humorous situations*,  
Instead write: *A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play about errors and mistaken identities that result in humorous situations*.
- Using the present tense brings drama and immediacy to a piece of writing; it brings the reader into the center of action. Use the simple present for fiction, expository (to show habit or custom), and descriptive pieces of writing.
- The simple past tense is the most commonly used in the English language; we most often tell about something that has already happened. As an indefinite past, it is the most flexible and useful tense. We can add time qualifiers to define what kind of past, such as *yesterday, an hour ago, or last year*.
- Use the simple past by itself or with other past tenses for narrative and descriptive pieces of writing.

### Verb tenses

**Simple present tense:** *The leaves spiral down to earth.* Use for events happening right now or for an action that always occurs.

**Present continuous:** *The leaves are spiralling down to earth.* Use this occasionally in fiction or if you are writing about an event happening right now, but it is generally not used in writing as much as present and past tenses. Example: "*The leaves are spiralling down to earth,*" thought the boy, as he observed the falling leaves.

**Simple past tense:** *The leaves spiralled down to earth.* It is the most commonly used tense to tell about an indeterminate time in the past, but it is also often used with time words to tell about a definite time. It is most often used in all kinds of fiction and expository writing.

**Present perfect tense:** *The leaves have spiralled down to earth.* This is also an indeterminate past, but it is more recent than the past tense and can be used to suggest incompleteness. In writing literary essays, use this tense to tell about events completed in the past of the piece of literature. Example: *By the end of Act 1, scene 1, the audience knows that Iago **has decided** to destroy Othello simply because he hates him.*

**Past perfect tense:** *The leaves had spiralled down to earth.* Use this tense to write about something that happened before another action, also in the past. Example: *The leaves had spiralled down to earth, but the snow had not yet started.*

**Past Continuous tense:** *The leaves were spiralling down to earth, and the boy waited for the snow to start falling.* Use this tense for a continuing action in the past in combination with another past action.

**Future tense:** *The leaves will spiral down to earth.* Use this tense with other events in the present and past to show future actions or intentions for characters or for future possibilities in expository essays. Example: *"Dad will be home soon," said the boy.*

