Choose a Verb Tense for a Memoir

1. Focus

Explain Choosing a Verb Tense for a Memoir

Say: When I write a memoir, I describe events as I remember them. I want readers to understand my thoughts and feelings. If I want my readers to feel an immediate connection to the events, I may use the present tense. This helps readers feel like they are right there in the action with me. If I want to share experiences in a way that offers more perspective, I may use the past tense. This gives my readers and me some distance from the events. It offers a chance for reflection. Neither way is right or wrong, but you will need to decide on a verb tense for your memoir. Today I’m going to show you what to consider when you choose between the past and present tenses for your memoirs.

Model How Writers Use Past and Present Verb Tenses

Display the modeling text on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources.

1. Yes, lots of things can happen when you jump out of an airplane. . . . They are all playing in my mind that August day in 1968. I’m in Jump School at Fort Benning, Georgia, 15,000 feet in the air. I’m ready to make my first jump.

2. Grandpa was a very accepting, open-minded person. A stranger was simply a friend he hadn’t met yet. Once, he returned to our little apartment with a homeless man. This man, whom we called Uncle Sam, became part of our family.

Modeling Text

Ask students to listen to the verb tense as you read aloud the first selection, from “What Comes Before Wings.”

Say: I see that the writer has used the present tense in this memoir. Even though the events he describes took place in 1968, the verbs—can, happen, jump, are, I’m, and make—are all in present tense forms. I think the writer chose to write in present tense for this action scene because it makes the scene immediate and exciting. I feel as I’m there with the writer getting ready to jump from an airplane.

Ask students to listen to the verb tense as you read the second selection, from “We Shall Not Be Moved.”

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, students will:

• Learn about choosing verb tense for a memoir.
• Practice using past and present verb tenses in writing.
• Discuss how they can apply this strategy to their independent writing.

Preparation

Materials Needed

• Chart paper and markers
• Interactive whiteboard resources

Advanced Preparation

If you will not be using the interactive whiteboard resources, copy the modeling text onto chart paper prior to the mini-lesson. If necessary, copy the sentence frames from “Strategies to Support ELs” onto chart paper.
2. Rehearse

Practice Writing Using Past and Present Verb Tenses

Ask students to work with partners to write two or three sentences describing something they did the day before (they might choose something they both experienced in class, if possible). Ask them to tell the story in the past tense. Then ask them to write the same story again in the present tense. Remind students that neither tense is necessarily better, but that they can provide a sense of greater distance (past tense) or nearness (present tense) to events. Pairs of students should write down their sentences and be prepared to read them to the class. They should be ready to explain the differences between the two versions of the story.

Share Practice Sentences

Bring students together and invite partners to read aloud their sentences and explain their word choices. Ask them which version of their story they prefer, stressing that neither is necessarily right or wrong. Record students’ sentences and post these as models for students to use as they write or revise their memoirs.

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: We learned that writers may use past or present tense when writing a memoir. Either one is correct. They each have a purpose. Your decision should depend on how you want to affect your readers and the connection you want to make. Remember these choices when you’re writing your own memoirs.

Ask students to consider their verb tenses carefully as they draft and revise their memoirs. During conferences, reinforce students’ use of this and other strategies using the prompts on your conferring flip chart.

4. Share

Bring the class together. Invite volunteers to read aloud a section of their memoirs in which they chose either the past or present tense. Ask them to explain their decisions.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning
Work with small groups of students to practice writing simple sentences using common but irregular verbs in the present tense and in the past tense. Provide sentence frames such as the following, modeling as necessary:

- I see ______.
- I saw ______.
- I go ______.
- I went ______.

Intermediate and Advanced
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the partner activity. Give them the following sentence frames to help them write their sentences:

Yesterday, I went to _____.
I saw ______.
I go to _____.
I see ______.