VERB TENSES

Which tense should I use?

When you write, pay attention to verb tense – past, present and future. Past tense is used to describe things that have happened in the past. Present tense is used to describe things that are happening now. Future tense is used to describe things that have yet to happen. When you write about history, you primarily use past tense because you are writing about things that happened in the past.

Stay consistent

It's easy to switch verb tenses, but it's important that you keep them consistent. Switching back and forth confuses the reader. Keep it simple and keep the past in the past.

When can I use present tense?

There are times when you might discuss something in your project that happens in the present, especially when you cover the long-term impact of your topic. In this case, you should use present tense. If you are doing a performance and the performance is set in the time of your topic, you will most likely use present tense (unless you are discussing an event that happened before the time of that character).

Using the correct verb tense can be tricky at times. Practice and good proof-reading are the best ways to make sure you get it right.

Assume you're doing a project on Madam C.J. Walker. Each scenario below could be something you write about in your project. Determine which tense you should use in your project for each one.

Section of the project	Past or Present Tense?
Madam C.J. Walker's early life, prior to starting her business.	
How Madam C.J. Walker developed her business in the early 1900s.	
The current state of the Madam Walker Theatre in downtown Indianapolis	
Walker's induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993	
The Spirit Awards, an annual award ceremony in honor of Walker, that honors national leaders in entrepreneurship, philanthropy, civic engagement, and the arts.	