



Verb Tenses: Writing about the Past

1. Use the past tense when relating an event in the past...

Parsons ~~begins~~ **began** his final statement by addressing “the American People” as his “fellow citizens.”

...even when discussing “immortal” works:

In the *Gettysburg Address*, President Lincoln ~~associates~~ **associated** the war to save the Union with the broader fight for human equality.

2. Use the present tense when discussing *your thinking* about the past.

President Lincoln’s close association of national unity with human equality **demonstrates** that the prevailing wisdom about the causes of the Civil War needs revision.

NOTE: even though this writer is discussing a past event—something President Lincoln said—he or she uses the present tense of demonstrate. Why? The writer is saying the evidence demonstrates something right now, in the current debate about the causes of the Civil War.

3. Use the past perfect to indicate that something happened before another event in the past:

In 1675, the English **ignored** Metacom’s complaints. Seventy years earlier, by contrast, the Jamestown colonists **had listened** attentively to Powhatan’s grievances.