

Piece #1
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LESSON FOCUS: TENSES: The time of the verb.

The Present Tense.

About English

It helps to think of how we use tense in English before undertaking an examination of how we use tense in Spanish. In academic English, the two most common tenses are the past tenses and the present.

We use the past tense to present facts, history (meaning anything that happened before this minute) and what we call "truth."

We use present tense to describe ongoing situations and to describe action, particularly fictional action and fictional characteristics. We generalize in the present tense as well. We present interpretations and opinions in the present tense.

Here is a short extract from a paragraph of "lit-crit" written in English.

Through our fantasies of the wild child, we hope to judge or test the values of our culture, for the wild child who comes into language, whose consciousness we see reshaped step-by-step into the molds and patterns that language provides, becomes a culture's purest product. Whatever they become is what we are. Shakespeare may

have been the first to recognize how acquiring language is a test of culture, as illustrated by his characterization of Caliban: "you taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse." And Mary Shelly was first to imagine thoroughly the full moral consequences of an unformed creature entering a world through language. Frankenstein's monster is a culmination of Enlightenment thinking about nature, culture, and language. His education, which is literary and sentimental, permeated by noble ideals, stands in wretched contrast to the brutal treatment he receives from all who see him and especially his creator. The deformed, abandoned creature is, for Mary Shelley, a perfect product of Enlightenment philosophy and romantic literature; as both a victim and perpetrator of violence, the monster demonstrates the ethical and political failures of the culture that formed and deformed him.

FROM: Berger, James. Editor's Preface: Documents of an Education. The Story of My Life. By Helen Keller. New York: Random House, 2003. vii - xxxv.

Note the use of present tense in this extract:

- we *hope* to judge or test the values of our culture
- wild child who *comes* into language
- we *see* reshaped step-by-step into
- the molds and patterns that language *provides*,
- *becomes* a culture's purest product.
- Whatever they *become*
- *is* what
- we *are*.
- acquiring language *is* a test of culture
- I *know* how to curse."
- Frankenstein's monster *is* a culmination
- which *is* literary and sentimental

- *stands* in wretched contrast to the brutal treatment
- he *receives* from
- all who *see* him and especially his creator.
- The deformed, abandoned creature *is*
- the monster *demonstrates* the ethical and political failures

In this extract, the author uses the present tense in many important ways:

1. To present his own thinking on an issue, including his generalizations and his interpretations of literary phenomena: Through our fantasies of the wild child, we hope to judge or test the values of our culture, for the wild child who comes into language, whose consciousness we see reshaped step-by-step into the molds and patterns that language provides, becomes a culture's purest product. . . acquiring language is a test of culture . . . Frankenstein's monster is a culmination. . . stands in wretched contrast. . . , the monster demonstrates the ethical and political failures of the culture

2. To narrate the contents of fiction, including important descriptions and narrative events: His education, which is literary and sentimental, permeated by noble ideals, stands in wretched contrast to the brutal treatment he receives from all who see him and especially his creator.

About Spanish

Spanish uses the present tense in many of the same ways that we do in English. So if you have only studied the

present tense, you've got a lot right there!

For a review of the present tense in Spanish, see the grammatical notes in your dictionary for a chart of the present tense in Spanish. You may also want to look at the verb charts under the "Helpful Links" on the homepage.

Keep in mind that for MOST of the reading you'll do, the so-called third person forms (he/she/it/ they) are the ones that you will need the most. In academic writing in both English and Spanish, there is relatively little use of the I/WE forms (first person) and the YOU (second person) forms.

The forms you really need to know cold are the singular and plural third person:

- ar verb form: habla/ hablan; he/she/it speaks/ they speak
- er verb form: come/comen; he/she/it eats; they eat
- ir verb form: sale/salen; he/she/it leaves; they leave

as well as the two most important irregulars:

- ser verb form: es/son; he/she/it is/ they are
- estar verb form: está/estan; he/she/it is/ they are

Here is an extract from an article on Garcia-Marquez's writings. Identify the present tense verbs in this extract by drawing a line under them. Then see if you can find the subject of each verb. Circle the subjects. Then decide the answers to these questions: In which cases is the author expressing opinion/interpretation? In which cases is the author narrating fiction?

El ambiente de *La mala hora* es tan sofocante como el de *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, pero, por encima de las desgracias individuales, se describe aquí la alienación que se apodera de una colectividad cuando aparecen pasquines pegados sobre las paredes del pueblo. Los secretos vergonzosos de los vecinos, verdad o mentira, salen a la luz pública. El odio generalizado precipita la descomposición social objetivada en un cataclismo natural, una especie de diluvio que exaspera a la gente. El alcalde pone en marcha el mecanismo represivo y encarcela a una víctima propiciatoria. Pero contra la locura colectiva, nada se puede hacer. Los pasquines reaparecen.

FROM: Jost, Jacques. Introducción. Cien Años de Soledad. By Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Madrid: Catedra. 11-76.