



Present Tense Tips: Use At Own Risk by Charles E. Yallowitz

I have to say that the scene from Spaceballs is very close to how some people have reacted to present tense writing. I know this is a topic I beat to death, but it's my style and I take several hits because of that. There are also times I get asked for my opinion on this and advice. Maybe I said these before, but I guess it needs repeating. Now, I use present tense third person, so keep that in mind. More difficult and controversial than present tense first person.

Flashbacks: These don't really work in the traditional sense. In present tense first person, you can have the narrator talk about an old event. Actually, having the event play out is where your timeline and tense can get muddled. Use this classic tool carefully and sparingly if you use it at all. There are other ways to get the history of your world and characters out into the world.

Historical Description: One of the traditional methods of flushing out a fantasy world is to include the history of the setting. You go beyond the five senses and mention what the land and the people used to be like. This is nearly impossible with the style that I write. Talking about the past with a nameless narrator requires switching to past tense, so it becomes jerky and disruptive to the flow. As with flashbacks, you need to find another method.

Talking: Character conversations is one thing you can depend on for world history building. If a character wouldn't know about an old event or how something works then they'll have to talk about it. For example, Luke is a warrior and doesn't understand magic. So, he has to talk to Nyx when he's confused. You see, this is also how life works in that we learn by asking questions. Unfortunately, many readers don't enjoy lengthy dialogues. This means you need to pepper the conversations with actions and keep the explanations clear. Using humor can help too, but that apparently can have some people calling your characters immature brats.

Actions: Present tense is about the now, so the now has to be exciting. Battles, chases, traps, or whatever fits your genre to physically move the story. I know fantasy more than other genres, so fight scenes are the most common usage. Even a friendly sparring match or spat between heroes can help. You have to understand that your narration can be limited in present tense because you can't go back too far, so you have to make the present interesting. Add actions in dialogue scenes as well to give a tighter sense of the scene. In present tense, 'he said, she said' can be thought of as characters standing rigidly together talking with no movement.

Observations: The five senses are still important and can tell you a lot. I use a flourishing language to paint my world because I'm attempting to trigger the senses of the reader. Within dialogue and action,

you can say what the characters see, hear, taste, and smell. It's another level of description that can really pull the scene together.

Emotions, Voice Tones, & Facial Expressions: Another trick to helping with atmosphere and action is to use facial expressions to denote emotions. Voice tone can help as well when in a conversation scene.

Emotions are very important in present tense because they change as scenes change. As events unfold, the characters need to react in real-time to things, so there is more fluidity and rollercoaster evolution. It helps to have realistic characters in present tense. Not so much in what they can do, but in their imperfections and reactions to the story. You can run into a problem here because many people don't like emotional heroes.

Now a lot of these can go for Past Tense too, especially the last one. The point here is that there are some things that Present Tense authors need to depend on more than the Past Tense authors. It's a rough path to walk because some people never realize what you're doing and assume it's just bad writing. Others can't get used to the change in style. I won't deny that it limits my audience, but I think it helps me stand out too. Not that standing out is my goal. In truth, I've been writing in Present Tense for at least 18 years and I never knew it was 'wrong' until 2013. It's how I write and it'll probably be how I always write. That's more important to me.

About The Author: Charles E. Yallowitz was born, raised, and educated in New York. Then he spent a few years in Florida, realized his fear of alligators, and moved back to the Empire State. When he isn't working hard on his epic fantasy stories, Charles can be found cooking or going on whatever adventure his son has planned for the day. Truthfully, his tales of adventure are much more interesting than his real life, so skip the bio and dive into the action.

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