Tense in Writing about Literature

When writing about literature, it is important to use the present tense to describe the events of a story. Literary works are peculiar in this way. Huckleberry Finn will always be rafting down the Mississippi River.

**Present Tense:**

Events in literary works of fiction occur every time they are read. Because of this, when writing about literature, it is important to use the present tense. For example:

Atticus Finch defends Tom Robinson against false rape charges from Bob Ewell. Atticus fails however, and Tom Robinson is shot while he tries to escape custody. The officer responsible claims he aimed for Tom's leg.

In this example, there is use of present tense throughout. Because of the tenses used, Atticus and Tom are both currently performing the actions.

**Past Tense:**

It is usually only appropriate to use the past tense when writing about literature when there is reference to the factual events surrounding the work's publication. For example:

Harper Lee published *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960. Lee loosely based the events of the novel on her life. For instance, Scout's eccentric friend Dill was inspired by Truman Capote, Lee's childhood friend.