



Where Has The Time Gone?

We seem to be living in a time where people just don't . . .

This sentence evokes an enjoyable image in our minds. It portrays the present as if it were a special place in time. While portraying a unique period in the past, present, or imagined future can be literarily enticing, it is less formal and less direct than we normally use in writing for public health.

This informal usage might have started with British author L.P. Hartley's excellent 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*. It began with this sentence: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." Hartley's metaphorical description of "the past" as a physical landscape with its own customs was clever at the time, but it's uncommon, informal, and can cause the reader to be distracted trying to figure out what it means.

"Where" can creep in when we lead with the preposition "in" instead of "at." We associate "in" with places. *Where did you leave the keys? In the top drawer. Where do you live? In Atlanta.* "In" makes "where" seem natural, so we get "in a time where . . ." But we should aim for more precision in our writing. Time is not usually a where. It's a when. "A time when," "a time in which," or "a time during which" are the more precise and logical phrases to use if you're writing something formal or speaking to an audience of scientists.

Practice: Rewrite these sentences

1. We're living in a time where information is everywhere, so it's important to check your sources before making health decisions.
2. This is a time where climate change influences human health and disease in numerous ways.
3. That was a time where more homes and workplaces contained lead paint.

Answers:

1. We're living in a time in which information is everywhere, so it's important to check your sources before making health decisions.
2. This is a time in which climate change influences human health and disease in numerous ways.
3. That was a time when more homes and workplaces contained lead paint.