

Writing in the Historical/Literary Presents

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1. Use the historical present when referring to an author's position as presented in the document you are examining.

In Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, he **states** that "the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice, man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the 'this-sidedness' of his thinking."

2. When writing about literature, use the literary present to discuss the actions and thoughts of the characters since the text is still in print and continues to be a present phenomenon each time it is read.

Throughout Virginia Woolf's novel *The Voyage Out*, Woolf continually **reminds** us of Rachel's lack of self-awareness and of her inadequate knowledge of human beings in general. Characters, such as St. John Hirst and Evelun Murgatroyd, repeatedly **ask** if Rachel **can actually feel or reason**; Helen Ambrose **considers** her to be a victim but also an uninformed human being who **does possess** some capacity to feel...but Rachel's response to people **is charged** with more than mere bewilderment. (Adapted from *A Madonna and a Woman of the World* by N. M. Grace.)

3. When dealing with an event or concept of the past, your overall approach to the material should be in the **past tense.**

From 1845 to 1848, Karl Marx **lived** in Brussels where he **took** an interest for the first time in political activity of a sort: he **helped** to found a German Workers Union and **read** papers at their meetings. Other groups of a similar kind **existed** in Europe for the study of radical social thought, but **were** only loosely **linked** until 1847, when at a meeting in London they **were joined** together in an international Communist League, with Engels as secretary. Marx **was asked** to draft a statement of principles—and so the *Communist Manifesto* was born. Engels had already drafted a statement, in the question and answer form of catechism, but in consultation with Marx agreed that it would be better to draw up a manifesto, since such a form would be likely to have more lasting historic value, and would give scope for a more elaborate theoretical exposition of their view. (Adapted from *Introduction to Marxist Theory* by Henry B. Mayo.)

4. The historical present is often required to indicate what is true at the present time and will remain true in the future. Use the present tense for most comments or observations by authorities about an issue under examination because the criticism is still in print and continues to be true in the present.

Alexander Balinky **believes** that the precise relationship between the Communist Manifesto and *Das Kapital* **deserves** special attention. He **explains** that Marx avowedly **declared** the capitalism of his day at death's door. The Manifesto **is** an eloquent and

dramatic statement of that conviction. Das Kapital **is** the “scientific proof” **offered** by Marx in support of the thesis as put forth in the 1848 document. Since scientific socialism **is** a world view encompassing the entire span of social history, Das Kapital **is**, in that context, no more than a social case of Marx’s general theory of socio-historical change. Understandably, however, Marx’s preoccupation **was** with the structure of capitalist society and with the economic logic by which it would destroy itself. Das Kapital **is**, therefore, primarily an economic treatise on the laws of capitalist development. Its direct concern **is** with capitalism and not with socialism or communism. The point **holds** even if we regard Marx’s major works as a whole. Marx **left** posterity only the barest and vaguest blueprint of the structure of post-capitalist societies and even less by way of a practical guide for their operation. (Adapted from Marx’s Economics: Origin and Development by Alexander Balinky.)

5. The use of the historical present becomes especially problematic when one discusses the author’s position, opinions, etc. as presented in the text as well as the author as a historical figure.

In these cases, the best way to tackle the problem is to split the author into two personas and actually approach the writing assignment as if you were writing about two different people. *The first of these people will be the authorial voice, which speaks to us from the pages we read—this voice comes from a continual present and must be expressed in the **historical present**. The second persona is the historical figure, the man or woman who lived, wrote, and died—the actions and thoughts of this individual must be expressed with the **past tense**, as the physical body no longer speaks or thinks.* The following passage on Virginia Woolf exemplifies how the historical present and the past tense can be mixed when one uses these two personas:

As “Reminiscences” and “Sketch of the Past” show us, Woolf **associated** loss of faith with her mother’s agony after the loss of her first husband and her mother’s subsequent conclusion that life’s true nature is cruel and tragic. By **juxtaposing** Rachel’s loss of faith (her agony after the death of feelings) with her quest for maternal counsel, Woolf **accentuates** two connections: (1) agony and the mother’s ability to understand such emotions, and (2) loss of faith as a metaphor for loss of the mother. By **allowing** Rachel to experience such a loss and to “grieve,” so to speak, over that loss, Woolf **permits** her to express indirectly her agony after the death of her mother. At the same time Woolf indirectly **expresses** the same grief. And as Woolf herself afterwards **sought** for mother substitutes, she **sends** Rachel on this quest for the maternal source. (Adapted from *A Madonna and a Woman of the World* by N. M. Grace.)