

LUC WRITING CENTER – “THE LITERARY OR HISTORICAL PRESENT TENSE”

When quoting a source in your paper, have you ever been confused about whether you should use present or past tense to refer to the author? A book has already been written, right, so it's in the past? Some teachers in the **humanities** will tell you to use present tense when quoting, which can be confusing. Which tense should you use?

A simple way that can help you figure out which tense to use is the **“Book Approach.”** It is especially effective when writing essays written in MLA style that both discuss literature and mention the history behind the works or author's lives.

- Imagine that you are holding a book that contains Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” You open and read a quote from King:

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

- In this minute, as the words flow from the page to your eye into your brain, the author is *speaking* to you. He is “alive,” in the sense that the author is *communicating* with you. Appearing in the following sentence, this convention is usually known as either the **“literary present”** or the **“historical present”**:

Describing the need for whites and blacks to unite for social transformation, King explains, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

- Let's say you are still holding the book open after reading the quote, but decide to summarize the information you've read instead of directly quoting. You look away from the page, consult with yourself, and then type the author's words as a summary. You can use the “literary present” or “historical present” still, because you are responding to your received understanding of the author's words you have just read.

In this work, King describes the need for whites and blacks to unite for social transformation, seeing such a duty as imperative, even if the consequences of racism do not immediately affect everyone.

- If you now close the book and mention a fact about the author's life, think of the author as being “dead” in the sense that the action is in the past or past present. Your words, without quotes, refer to a statement of fact: “While incarcerated in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 for peacefully protesting racial inequality, civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. **employed** many kinds of rhetoric to convince local white ministers to support his peaceful mission to achieve rights for African-Americans.”

However, remember that APA format does not use the “historical present,” even when quoting. Instead, the past or present past tense is used to summarize an author's words or introduce a quote. It's a good idea to check with your instructor, especially in a science class, before writing an essay to see what tense you should use when quoting a source.