Guide to the Use of Verb Tense in the Humanities

According to the MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing:

General Principles:
1. Use past tense to narrate past events:
   * President Wilson hoped for vindication in the upcoming election.

2. Use present or present progressive to write about things happening now:
   * The war intensifies daily.
   * The situation is worsening by the hour.

3. Use present tense to state general truths or habitual action:
   * Two physical bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time.
   * We long for final answers.

When you are writing about Literature, the following conventions apply. Most of these involve what we call the “literary present”—the idea that fiction exists in a timeless world properly described in the present tense. Such conventions apply to discussions of theme, plot, and authorial intent:
   * In The Color Purple, Alice Walker shows the lasting affection between two women.
   * In The Crucible, John Proctor decides to die rather than tarnish his reputation.

At times, you may need to use other tenses to help clarify complex chronological relationships:
   * Even though Claudius earlier killed Hamlet’s father, he now expects few problems from the young prince.

When you are writing about History, the following conventions apply:
1. As a general rule, most of what you write in history papers will be narrative couched in some form of the past tense:
   * Although Lodge once had supported a war league, he reversed himself after Wilson linked to “peace without victory.”

   This principle applies to thoughts as well as to actions:
   * Many progressives, who thought well of Wilson’s dream of a new world order, drew back in revulsion when the terms of the treaty were published.

   Accordingly in a history essay you should write:
   * Pope satirized the frivolity of a privileged society.
Writing about History (cont’d)

2. In general, reserve the present tense for presenting opinions current among historians today:
   * Link contends that Wilson’s critics have minimized the difficulties he faced.

3. As one further point, unless you have a good reason, it is best to couch your historical statements in sentences that discuss directly the actions of historical actors, not the content of sources.

   Rather than writing:
   * Document 7 shows Voltaire’s contempt for priests

   You should write:
   * Voltaire held priests in utter contempt (Doc. 7).