

A (or An) Historical Dilemma

Grammarians lurk in curious places.

In the summer of 1999, the National Archives and Records Administration hired me to help create a style guide. Every week or so, I'd meet with a committee of six in-house experts to refine the draft and get a consensus on issues in dispute. Most of the disputed issues were fairly straightforward – what should be hyphenated, what should be capitalized, and so on, and we dispatched these with good speed. But then we hit a serious snag: should the writer use “a” or “an” in front of *historic* and *historical*?

I was surprised by both the vigor and the length of the ensuing debate. No doubt about it, *historic* and *historical* are important words at National Archives, but I was still surprised by how passionate people were about which article to use with these words. Passion, as everyone knows, has a way of interfering with reason, and for nearly an hour I sat there goggling at arguments eerily evocative of dialogue from Harold Pinter.

And because the dialogue is what's important, I've decided to present it stark naked, as a postmodernist play in one act. Just picture a spacious, comfortable, well-lighted conference room with seven people sitting around large wooden table.

Richard: So which is it to be? “A” or “an”?

Sue: “Historical” and “historic” start with an *h*. *H* is a consonant. Consonants take “a.”

Joe: “Hour” starts with an *h* and it doesn't take “a.” It takes “an.”

Ted: But you don't pronounce the *h* in “hour”! It's a silent *h*.

Diane: You don't pronounce the *h* in “historical,” either.

Sue: Yes, you do.

Max: No, you don't.

Ted: I do.

Ellen: I do too!

Sue: In New England, they do.

Diane: No, they don't. I'm from Connecticut. I don't pronounce it.

Ellen: You told me you were born in Maryland.

Diane: I was born in Maryland, but I was raised in Connecticut.

Sue: I'm from Vermont and in Vermont we pronounce it!

Max: Well, most people don't pronounce it. They say *istorical*.

Ted: No, they don't!

Joe: That's the way I say it. I don't pronounce the *h*.

Ellen: Where are you from?

Joe: North Carolina.

Sue: North Carolina is the South.

Max: So?

Sue: I surely hope you're not suggesting we use Southern pronunciation –

Diane: (cutting her off) Didn't I just tell you that in Connecticut we don't pronounce it?

Sue: You also told me you were originally from Maryland.

Max: You can't call Maryland "South."

Joe: I'll bet you can pick any state you want and some people will pronounce the *h* and others won't!

Sue: The ones who don't are wrong.

Max: Wrong? Dan Rather doesn't pronounce it! You're calling Dan Rather wrong?

Ellen: Dan Rather is from Texas.

Ted: It doesn't matter!

Sue: How can you say it doesn't matter?

Ted: Because the way I always see it written, it's "a historical."

Diane: That's not the way I always see it written.

Ellen: You always see it written "an historical"? Go on!

Diane: No, sometimes I see "a historical" and sometimes I see "an historical."

Ted: Well, both of them can't be right!

Joe: It depends on the author!

Ellen: I always thought there was a rule.

Sue (didactically): The rule is that you put an "a" before a consonant and an "an" before a vowel.

Max: That's not the rule!

Ted: Yes, it is!

Diane: No, it isn't!

Sue: It's what I was taught!

Max: You were taught wrong!

Sue gasps.

Ted: How can you *say* that?

Joe: All that matters is the sound of the next letter. You'd say, "a FEMA policy," but you'd say, "an FCC policy."

Sue (aghast): But you certainly don't write them that way.

Joe: Of course you do!

Sue: I most certainly do not! I'm not a barbarian.

Max: You put an "a" in front of "FBI agent"?

Sue: Of course!

Joe: That's wrong! You've been doing it wrong!

Max: You should write "an FBI agent."

Ellen: That's preposterous!

(Diane gapes.)

Max: You write "a European vacation," "a unique solution," "an SOS," "an MX" –

Joe: The sound is what counts.

Sue: When you're speaking, yes, but not when you write.

Joe (astonished): What?

Ted: Those are exceptions!

Diane: They prove the real rule!

Ellen: What makes a rule real, anyway?

Sue: Peter Jennings is from Canada.

Ellen: He is?

Ted: I didn't know that.

Joe: (*impatiently*) What does Peter Jennings have to do with anything?

Sue: If we're using Dan Rather to decide what's right, why can't we use Peter Jennings?

Joe: Are we using Dan Rather to decide what's right? Have we agreed about that?

Ellen: What does Dan Rather do again?

Max: He doesn't pronounce the *h*.

Sue: What makes him the voice of God here?

Max: Only the fact that half the country listens to him every night. You think they won't assume he's speaking standard English?

Ellen: He's still not the voice of God.

Sue: He's not the voice of God in Vermont! We pronounce it!

Max: And don't tread on you.

Diane: What does Peter Jennings do?

Joe: Whatever Peter Jennings does, it isn't relevant, because he's from Canada!

Diane: What does Tom Brokaw do? Does anyone know?

Joe: Even if Tom Brokaw pronounces the *h*, it doesn't mean he's right.

Sue: Then who *is*?

Ellen: Can we please establish, once and for all, that no one has the status of the voice of God?

Max: Well, standards have to come from somewhere.

Sue: They don't have to come from the nightly news.

Ted: They could come from respectable publications.

Joe: No, no, no, no!

Ted: Why not?

Joe: Because the entire issue here is how we *pronounce* something!

Sue: I don't see what difference that makes.

Ted: Sue's right. When I read "a historical," I know that the writer is pronouncing the *h*.

Max: No, you don't!

Ted: Why don't I?

Max: Because for all you know, the writer is simply following what you said was the rule! He might not pronounce the *h* when he says "historic," but write an "a" in front of it because it starts with a consonant!

Sue: That's not what I meant.

Diane: What did you mean?

Sue: I meant that since "historical" starts with an *h*, we use an "a."

Joe: This is killing me!

Ted: Peter Jennings pronounces the *h*.

Max: We've already discarded Peter Jennings!

Ellen: Who died and made you king?

Max: You can't appeal to authority on this.

Ted: We have to appeal to authority!

Max: Why?

Ted: Because what we are doing is being authoritative, dammit!

Max: So?

Ted: So where do we get *our* authority from? We can't simply dictate!

Joe: (*rolling his eyes dramatically*) No, Heaven forbid we should dictate style in a style guide.

Ellen: Everything depends on what you read! *The Economist* does it one way and *Time* does it a different way.

Ted: Which way does *Time* do it?

Ellen: *Time* uses “a.”

Sue: Then that’s what we should do!

Max: *The Economist* is a much more intelligent publication.

Ted (*vexed*): What?

Max: It’s more intelligent!

Sue: How can you say that?

Max: I mean it has a more intelligent readership.

Ellen: Even if that’s true, what does it have to do with anything?

Joe: It’s a moot point!

Sue: Moot? Why?

Joe: Because *The Economist* is British!

Sue: So?

Diane: Excuse me, but isn’t this the United States?

Joe: The British pronounce the h in “herb.” We say *erb*! They put an “a” in front of it and we put an “an” in front of it.

Sue: I don’t. (*Flatly.*) H is a consonant.

Max: Joe’s right. We shouldn’t base any decision on what *The Economist* does.

Diane: What does *Time* do, again?

Ellen: *Time* uses “an.”

Ted: That’s not what you said before!

Ellen: It isn’t?

Sue: What does *Newsweek* do? Does anybody know?

Max: At this point, do you think it matters what *Newsweek* does?

Sue: It might!

Joe: Richard, what do you think?

Richard: Well, it’s pretty clear that some people prefer “a” and some people prefer “an.” It’s also clear that we see it both ways when we read. I think we should tell writers to use the article they prefer, so long as they’re consistent.

All the others, in unison: That’s not guidance!

Sue: You never hear anyone say “an history.”

Joe: What does that have to do with anything?

Sue: We always say “a history.”

Joe: I grant your point!

Max: And so *what*?

Sue: I should think it would be obvious. “Historic” and “historical” should be treated in the same way.

Max: You still don’t get it, do you?

Ted: There’s no need to get personal.

Diane: To hell with it! Let’s vote!

Sue: How many in favor of using “a”?

Ted, Ellen, and Sue raise their hands.

Diane: How many in favor of using “an”?

Joe, Max, and Diane raise their hands.

Max: Richard's vote will decide it.

All look expectantly at Richard.

Richard: I'm not voting. It's done both ways by good writers.

Joe: It's a stalemate.

Sue: You will never, ever get me to put an "an" in front of "historic." (*She shudders.*)
The idea is revolting!

And it went on this way, quite passionately. No one in the "a" camp would budge. No one in the "an" camp would give an inch. Finally we resolved to let writers decide which article to use, asking only for consistency within a particular document. This decision pleased no one but me.

A month later, I got a telephone call from the project officer. The debate had continued and had apparently escalated to the highest levels of the organization, where both "an" and "a" found champions. So much time was being wasted in arguing about which was correct that NARA finally picked one – they picked "a."

I asked whether the choice had ended the debate. It had not.

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