

historic vs. historical

A listener, Denise, wants to know if she should say, "We sell historic replicas" or "We sell historical replicas." Was an event "a historic occasion" or was it "a historical occasion"? These are good questions because it's easy to get these two words confused. They sound alike and their meanings overlap, but the two words are used differently.

Now, Bonnie writes:

1. Historic :

"Historic" is an adjective that means something important or influential in history. So Denise should say, "The treaty was a historic occasion." It was an important occasion. It would be incorrect to say, "We sell historic replicas" unless they are replicas that are important to history. You've probably heard TV announcers refer to "historic treaties" or perhaps you've visited some "historic houses" or "historic battlefields." All of these were important or famous things in history.

2. Historical :

"Historical," on the other hand, is an adjective that refers to anything from the past, important or not. Denise should say, "We sell historical replicas" because these replicas are from the past; they're probably not so important. A "historical occasion" would be just some occasion in the past; it wasn't necessarily an important occasion. "Historical documents" are just documents that record the past. You've probably read a "historical novel" or perhaps even a "historical romance," which are books set in the past. There is nothing especially important about these books; if they were, they'd be "historic books." The Gutenberg Bible would be a historic book, for example.

3. comment :

Deciding to use historic is often a judgment call, since one person's historic event can be another person's historical event. For example, if Alex Rodriguez hits a game-winning home run in a clutch game, Yankee fans might call it historic. Baseball historians and Red Sox fans might say it was merely historical. A baby's first step is historic to her parents, but merely historical to her pediatrician. Lincoln was a historical figure who made many historic decisions.

Coming from a different era isn't enough to make something historic. A well-preserved Victorian building should be called historical, not historic, unless something important happened there. The French Quarter of New Orleans is a historical district. Hurricane Katrina was a historic event.