

A vs an: choose by sound

CEFR A1-A2 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Choose a before a consonant sound and an before a vowel sound. Spelling is not the test; your ears are.

The rule

The sound test

- Say the next word out loud and listen to the first sound.
- First sound is a vowel (/a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/ sounds): use an. An artist, an umbrella, an idea.
- First sound is a consonant: use a. A table, a yellow car, a European city.
- The five vowel letters a, e, i, o, u usually make vowel sounds, so usually they take an: an apple, an elephant, an island, an orange, an umbrella.

Words that fool the eye

- University, user, useful, uniform and European begin with a /ju:/ consonant sound, so they take a: a university, a useful book.
- One and once begin with a /w/ sound, so they take a: a one-hour class, a once-in-a-lifetime trip.
- Hour, honest and honour have a silent h, so they take an: an hour, an honest answer, an honour.
- Hotel and hospital do not have a silent h in standard English, so they take a: a hotel, a hospital.

Silent letters and vowel sounds

- A silent h turns a consonant letter into a vowel start: an heir, an hour.
- Letters that sound like a vowel name take an: an MP3 player, an LED screen, an X-ray.
- An abbreviation with a consonant name takes a: a UFO, a URL, a USB stick.
- When the sound is uncertain, say the phrase faster. Natural speech shows the real first sound.

A and an in sentences

- A and an go before a singular countable noun: a chair, an egg, a message.
- They introduce something new or one of many: "I saw a dog in the park."
- They also describe jobs and roles: "She is a nurse", "He is an engineer."
- They cannot stand before a plural or an uncountable noun. Say "books", "water" or "some books", not "a books".

Speed, emphasis and exceptions

- In fast speech, some words change their first sound. An historic is old-fashioned; most speakers today say a historic. Choose the spoken form you use.
- A before an abbreviation is decided by the letter name: an FBI agent, a BBC reporter.

- The article changes if the word after it changes: a hero, an honest hero.
- When you write, check the word directly after the article, not the whole sentence.

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. She bought ___ apple at the market.

2. He is ___ engineer for a large company.

3. We waited ___ hour for the train.

4. My sister studies at ___ university in London.

5. I need ___ umbrella today.

6. It was ___ honest answer.

7. They stayed at ___ hotel near the beach.

8. He plays ___ one-hour match every Saturday.

9. She sent me ___ MP3 file with the song.

10. We watched ___ European film last night.

11. There is ___ old castle on the hill.

12. He works as ___ pilot.

13. I will be back in ___ hour or two.

14. That is ___ useful website for learners.

15. She adopted ___ cat from the shelter.

16. He gave me ___ X-ray report.

17. They live in ___ nice apartment.

18. We need ___ assistant who speaks Spanish.

19. Please open ___ window.

20. It took ___ hour to finish the form.

Answer key

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1. **an** — Apple begins with a vowel sound, so the article is an.
2. **an** — Engineer begins with a vowel sound, so it takes an.
3. **an** — The h in hour is silent, so the first sound is a vowel and the article is an.
4. **a** — University begins with the consonant sound /ju:/, so it takes a.
5. **an** — Umbrella begins with a vowel sound, so the article is an.
6. **an** — Honest has a silent h, so the word starts with a vowel sound and takes an.
7. **a** — Hotel has a pronounced h sound, so the article is a.
8. **a** — One starts with the consonant sound /w/, so it takes a.
9. **an** — The letter M is said with a vowel name, so MP3 takes an.
10. **a** — European begins with the consonant sound /ju:/, so it takes a.
11. **an** — Old begins with a vowel sound, so the article is an.
12. **a** — Pilot begins with a consonant sound, so the article is a.
13. **an** — Hour starts with a silent h and a vowel sound, so it takes an.
14. **a** — Useful begins with the consonant sound /ju:/, so it takes a.
15. **a** — Cat begins with a consonant sound, so the article is a.
16. **an** — The letter X is said with a vowel name, so X-ray takes an.
17. **a** — Nice begins with a consonant sound, so the article is a.
18. **an** — Assistant begins with a vowel sound, so the article is an.
19. **a** — Window begins with a consonant sound, so the article is a.
20. **an** — The silent h in hour leaves a vowel sound, so the article is an.