

# Indefinite articles in English (a and an)

---

The article a/an

It is used when the thing or person we are talking about is not specific (it is "indefinite"):

- I met **a** friend in New York.
- I work in **a** school.

a/year exists only in the singular, and only before a name that can be counted.

- There is **a** book on the chair (singular)
- There are books on the chair (plural)
- *There are **a** books on the chair = FAUX !*
- There is water on the floor (we can't count water... so we put nothing here!)

We use a/an to talk about someone's job:

- He is **a** doctor (we don't say 'he is doctor')

We put a before a consonant (b, c, d, f, g, p, m, etc...):

- **a** bear
- **a** teacher
- **a** table
- **a** dog
- **a** pilot

We put **an** in front of a vowel (a, e, i, o, u):

- **an** apple
- **an** invitation
- **an** elephant
- **an** actor
- **an** umbrella

But in fact, it's not that simple....

It is the sound of the first letter of a word that determines whether we use a or an: if the word begins with a vowel sound, we use AN. If the word begins with a consonant sound, A is used.

Indeed, they say:

- **a** university
- **a** unicorn
- **a** euro
- **a** european

- a user

⚠ Even if hour, honor and x-ray start with consonants, we use "an" because they pronounce themselves as if they started with a vowel:

- an hour
- an honor
- an x-ray

This is also why we use *an* when we talk about the letter F or the number 1 or 8:

- Your name is Francis, with an F? (NOT 'with a F?')
- He is an FBI agent (NOT 'he is a FBI agent')
- I can't see, is it a one or a seven?

It is not really a question of whether the word begins with a vowel or not, but with a vowel sound.

- Buy a house in an hour = *house* and *hour* start with the same letters but pronounce differently!
- An unknown woman saw a unicorn = same thing, *unknown* and *unicorn* start with the same letters but pronounce themselves differently. Either A or AN is used depending on the sound!

Remember that it is the sound that is important!

### ⚠ Herb & Hospital: it depends!

Do we say *a hospital* or *an hospital*? The letter H of these two words is pronounced or not depending on whether you have an American or British accent. In American, the H is silent, so it looks more like an herb, a hospital...

Defined (the) or indefinite (a, an) article?

Finally, look at the following example to understand the difference:

- Pass me a cup (any one)
- Pass me the cup (a precise cup)
- I need a pen (any one)
- I need the pen (a specific pen)