



A or An?

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"A" goes before all words that begin with consonants.

- a cat
- a dog
- a purple onion
- a buffalo
- a big apple

with one exception: Use *an* before unsounded *h*.

- an honorable peace
- an honest error

"An" goes before all words that begin with vowels:

- an apricot
- an egg
- an Indian
- an orbit
- an uprising

with two exceptions: When *u* makes the same sound as the *y* in *you*, then *a* is used.

- a union
- a united front
- a unicorn
- a used napkin
- a U.S. ship

Note: The exceptions for the articles are based upon the orthographic or written representation of the word-initial letter not the phonetic or sound quality of the letter. So, if you consider the rule from a phonetic perspective, there aren't any exceptions. Since the 'h' hasn't any phonetic representation, no audible sound, in the first exception, the sound that follows the article is a vowel; consequently, 'an' is used. In the second exception, the word-initial 'y' sound (unicorn) is actually a glide [j] phonetically, which has consonantal properties; consequently, it is treated as a consonant, requiring 'a'.

After reviewing this handout, try a practice exercise at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/esliartEX1.html>.

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

This page is located at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/esl/esliart.html>

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