

Using *a* and *an*

Learning when to use *a* and *an* may be one of the first spelling rules students learn. However, even in the upper grades, students do not always remember the rule for when to use these words. Many students have not internalized the correct sound pattern of using *an* before words that begin with a vowel or a vowel sound.

Rule

Use *an* before words beginning with a vowel or a vowel sound.

1. Identify the vowels. Write *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* on the board. Remind students that all the other letters of the alphabet are consonants.
2. Now write two rows of vowels and add the *r*-controlled vowel symbols (see below) in the third row. (Refer to Louisa C. Moats's English Vowel Chart in her book, *LETRS: Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*, 2003, Module 2, page 98, for a complete visual of all the vowel sounds.)

Vowel Sounds

Short vowel sounds	ă	ĕ	ĭ	ŏ	ŭ
Long vowel sounds	ā	ē	ī	ō	
<i>r</i> -controlled vowel sounds	âr	êr	îr	ôr	ûr

3. Explain the rule: Use ***an*** before words beginning with a vowel or a vowel sound. Tell students: *Pay careful attention to the initial sound. Sometimes a word begins with a vowel and makes a consonant sound and vice versa.*
4. Draw breve marks (˘) above the first row of vowels. Review the short vowel sounds and use a few examples to demonstrate the rule (e.g., *an apple*, *an igloo*).
5. Draw macrons (¯) above the second row of vowels and review the long vowel sounds. Explain to students that there is no long *u* vowel sound. Long *u* is the consonant sound of *y* /y/ followed by /ōō/. If a word begins with the letter *u* and it makes a long *u* sound, it is preceded by the word *a*, not the word *an*.
6. Write the words *university*, *uniform*, and *used* on the board. Have students pronounce them and write each in a sentence, using both *a* and *an* as articles. Emphasize the consonant *y* /y/ sound at the beginning followed by /ōō/, and how these words flow better when preceded with the article *a*. Tell students that words beginning with the letter *u* have a consonant *y* /y/ sound followed by /ōō/. These words follow the rule and are preceded by the word *a*.



umbrella

unicorn

a or an Word-Sort Race

Rule

Use *an* before words beginning with a vowel or a vowel sound.

Directions: Cut out the word cards. Put the *a* card on the left side of your desk and the *an* card on the right side. Turn the other word cards facedown. At your teacher's signal, turn over the word cards and place them under *a* or *an*.



a		an	
hungry student	woman	energetic woman	endangered eagle
elephant	giant elephant	X ray	blurry X ray
professor	intelligent professor	neighbor	honest neighbor
hour	long hour	umbrella	huge umbrella
situation	humorous situation	university	old university
automobile	hybrid automobile	SOS signal	faint SOS signal
story	interesting story	game	unbelievable game
hand	soft hand	F grade	disappointing F grade