

## ESL: 'A' vs. 'An'

Simply put: "a" is an article which refers to a noun that begins with a consonant.

*I shot a man in Reno.*

"An" is an article which refers to a noun that begins with a vowel.

*I shot an apple off of his head.*

Notice the difference. In the first example, we used the article "a" to refer to the noun beginning with a consonant ("man"). In the second example, "an" refers to a noun beginning with a vowel ("apple").

Yet the use of "a" vs. "an" can be complicated further. Only use "a" or "an" (depending on the noun to which it refers) for count nouns. A count noun is simply a noun that can be counted.

*I ate a pear.*

"Pear" is a count noun because we can physically count the number of pears.

Do not use "a" or "an" with noncount nouns. A noncount noun, obviously, is a noun that cannot be counted. This can be something abstract such as love or danger.

You would not write

*I am looking for a love.*

Remove the "a" and make the sentence read

*I am looking for love.*

The second version of the sentence is superior to the first.

To sum up, when trying to decide whether to use "a" or "an," ask yourself two questions. What is the noun to which the article refers? Does it begin with a

consonant or a vowel? This will direct you towards employing either “a” or “an.”

Second, ask yourself, “Is this a count noun or a noncount noun?” If it is a count noun, then stick to an “a” or an “an.” If it is a noncount noun, do not use the article at all.