

a, an and plurals

English Grammar · A1

a and an

a or an?

a	an
consonant sound	vowel sound
<i>a book</i>	<i>an apple</i>

a or an?: reference card grid

a and **an** mean “one” and are used before **singular countable nouns**. How to choose depends on **pronunciation**:

- **a** + consonant sound: a book, a dog, a cat.
- **an** + vowel sound: an apple, an egg, an orange.

I have a pen.

I have a pen.

She eats an apple.

She eats an apple.

Note: Look at the sound, not the letter: an **h**our (h is silent), a **u**niversity (pronounced “yu-”).

Plural Nouns

To indicate “more than one,” use the **plural** form of the noun, usually adding **-s**:

- Generally add **-s**: book → books, car → cars.
- Words ending in -s / -sh / -ch / -x add **-es**: bus → buses, box → boxes.
- Consonant + y ending: change y to i and add -es: baby → babies, city → cities.

I have two cats.

I have two cats.

Irregular plurals (must memorize):

- man → **men**, woman → **women**, child → **children**.
- foot → **feet**, tooth → **teeth**, person → **people**.

Note: Do **not** use a / an before plural nouns: ~~a books~~ × → books / two books ✓.

Common Errors

- × ~~I have dog.~~ → ✓ I have **a** dog. — In Chinese you can say “I have dogs,” but singular countable nouns in English must have a / an (or my, the, etc.) before them.
- × ~~an university~~ → ✓ **a** university; × ~~a hour~~ → ✓ **an** hour — Look at pronunciation, not spelling: university starts with a consonant sound /j/, and h is silent in hour.
- × ~~two book~~ → ✓ two **books** — Chinese nouns do not change for plurality, but nouns after numbers in English require -s; this is easily forgotten.
- × ~~three childs~~ → ✓ three **children** — Irregular plurals must be memorized separately: men, women, children, feet, teeth, people.
- × ~~a people~~ → ✓ **a person** (one person) / people (many people) — people is inherently plural.