

When to use “a”

- You’re talking about a single non-specific noun
- The noun starts with a consonant (A letter that isn’t “A,” “E,” “I,” “O,” or “U”)

Example: *I went to **a** hair salon to get **a** haircut.*

In this example, the use of “a” is referring to a non-specific hair salon (this tells us that which hair salon it is, is not important to the story) and a non-specific haircut (this tells us that the haircut is not very important either).

When to use “the”

- You’re talking about a single specific noun

Example: *I went to **the** hair salon to get **the** haircut.*

In this example, the use of “the” is referring to a specific hair salon, although not specific enough that anyone will know what it is. Using “the” implies that the person the speaker is talking to knows the specific hair salon, whether it’s the salon that the speaker always goes to, or if a famous event happened there. The same applies for using “the” in front of haircut. By referring to the haircut the speaker got by using “the” it implies that it is a specific haircut. We don’t know what about the haircut makes it more important than others, but because the speaker used “the” we know it is.

When to use “an”

- You’re talking about a single non-specific noun
- The noun starts with a vowel (“A,” “E,” “I,” “O,” or “U” with exceptions)

Example: *I went to **an** emergency room and had **an** operation.*

“An” is used in the same way that “a” is used, except that it is only used when the word following it starts with a vowel. Using “an” implies that the specifics of which emergency room and which operation are not very important to the story.

“An” acts exactly like “a,” except that it is only used in front of words that start with vowels.

Exceptions: *About **an** hour ago, **an** FBI agent knocked on my door.*

Notice how even though these words don’t start with a vowel, it is appropriate to use “an” here. This is because even though the word doesn’t start with a vowel letter, it starts with a vowel sound when spoken. “Hour” is pronounced like “our,” which does start with a vowel. “FBI” sounds like “Eff-Bee-Eye.”

Remember:

“A” and “an” are called indefinite articles. They refer to something that is not specific and not necessarily known by others.

“The” is a definite article. It refers to something specific that others are aware of.