

a, an and plurals

English A1

What this topic teaches

Chinese gets through life without articles : needs no little word before the noun. English cannot. A singular countable noun in English almost never stands naked – it needs a small word in front, and today that word is **a** or **an**.

- **a / an** means “one, and not a special one”: *a book, an apple*.
- Plurals take **-s**: *books, apples* – with a few spelling dances.
- Memory hook: *a* is a ticket. A singular countable noun cannot enter the sentence without one.
- This is the biggest structural gap between Chinese and English, so be patient with yourself. The ticket rule will feel strange for weeks, then suddenly it will feel wrong to skip it. That day has a name: progress.

a or an: listen, don't read

The choice depends on the **sound** that follows, not the spelling .

Sound that follows	Use	Examples
a consonant sound	a	a book, a cat, a university
a vowel sound	an	an apple, an egg, an hour

- *a university* – it begins with a “yoo” sound, and “yoo” is a consonant sound. The letter is a vowel; the sound is not.
- *an hour* – the h is silent, so the word begins with a vowel sound.
- The rule exists for the ear: *a apple* is hard to say, so English smooths it to *an apple*. Say both aloud and feel the difference. Your mouth knew this rule before your teacher did.

Plurals: the -s dances

Most nouns just add **-s**: *book* → *books*, *pen* → *pens*. Some dance first.

Ending	The dance	Example
-s, -sh, -ch, -x	add -es	bus → buses, watch → watches
consonant + y	y → ies	city → cities, baby → babies
-f / -fe	f → ves (some nouns)	knife → knives, wife → wives
vowel + y	just add -s	day → days, boy → boys

- The -es dance adds a syllable : *watch* is one beat, *watches* is two. If the plural is easier to say, you probably spelled it right.

- A few nouns are **irregular** and simply refuse to dance: *child* → *children*, *person* → *people*, *man* → *men*, *woman* → *women*, *foot* → *feet*, *tooth* → *teeth*, *mouse* → *mice*. These are very old words that kept their old plural forms. Memorise them as friends, not rules.
- △ *sheep* and *fish* stay the same in the plural: *one sheep*, *two sheep*. The sheep does not change. The sheep does not care.

a with one, nothing with many

a/an belongs to singular nouns only. Plurals go bare when you mean “in general”.

- *I have a cat.* – one cat, ticket attached.
- *I like cats.* – cats in general, no ticket needed; the plural itself does the job.
- △ Never “*a books*”. The ticket is for one; the -s means many. They cannot share a noun, like two drivers with one steering wheel.
- △ And never bare singular: “*I have cat*” sounds like you are about to eat it. *I have a cat.*

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **The missing ticket.** works with or without , so “*I am student*” feels fine. It is not. English: *I am a student*. Every time.
- △ **Do not over-ticket.** Because teachers shout “don’t forget a!”, learners start writing “*I like a music*”. General ideas with plural or uncountable nouns take no *a*: *I like music*. *Dogs are friendly*.
- △ **an follows sound, not the first letter.** *an honest boy* (h is silent), *a European city* (“yoo”). When in doubt, say it aloud and let your ear vote.

Say it aloud

Describe your bag, your desk, your life – everything gets a ticket or a plural.

- I have a pen, an eraser and three books.
- There is an apple in my bag. (Probably. It has been there a while.)
- I like cats, but I am a dog person. The dogs know.

Now ten fast ones: *ear*, *university*, *hour*, *orange*, *umbrella*, *European*, *egg*, *idea*, *honest man*, *yellow bus*. a or an? Say them aloud – your ear is the teacher.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. ____ *apple a day*. – **An**. A vowel sound follows, and *a apple* is unpronounceable in polite company.
2. ____ *university* – **a**. It begins with the consonant sound “yoo”; the ear rules, not the letter.
3. *watch* in the plural – **watches**. The -ch ending dances the -es dance.
4. *I have three* ____ (*child*). – **children**. An old irregular friend; no -s anywhere.
5. *I am* ____ *student*. – **a**. The Chinese sentence survives without its measure word; English does not.