The indefinite article a/an in IELTS

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One-page cheat sheet · Grammatical Range & Accuracy

> **The main rule: a singular countable noun never stands alone. Something must come before it: a/an, the, my, this, every, one… — or switch to the plural.**

Bare noun → fixed

✗	✓
Child needs attention.	A child needs… / Children need…
Government should build hospital.	The government should build a hospital.
It is good idea.	It is a good idea.
I am student.	I am a student.

Three-question check for every bare noun

1. **Countable?** one problem, two problems — yes; *one information* — no → no a.
2. **Singular?** If not → no a.
3. **Already the / my / this / every…?** If not → it needs a/an (or the, if specific and known).

Then check the **sound** of the next word: a or an. An "articles only" pass over a finished essay takes a couple of minutes.

When to use a

- **First mention:** A recent study found… → *The study*…
- **Jobs, roles, classification:** My father is an engineer. Tashkent is a big city. She works as a nurse. (but: He was elected president.)
- **a + adjective + noun:** a (very) serious problem
- **Intensifiers:** such a long day · what a waste · quite a popular idea · too big a risk (essay: no "of")
- **Numbers:** a hundred, a thousand, a dozen · a third of students · half an hour · a lot of, a number of, a wide range of
- **a number of ≠ the number of:** A number of students **are**… · The number of students **is**…
- **"Per":** twice a week · 60 km an hour · $5 a kilo ✗ twice in a week
- **Task 1 trends as nouns:** There was a sharp rise / a slight decline / a peak of 40% ✗ There was sharp increase

A or an — by sound, not by letter

Vowel letter, consonant sound → a	Consonant letter, vowel sound → an
a university · a European country · a useful tip · a one-way ticket · a unique chance	an hour · an honest answer · an MBA · an SUV · an 8% increase · an 11-year-old

It looks at the **next word**: an apple → a red apple · a university → an old university · an 18% rise · a 25% rise

When a is wrong

Uncountable — no a, no -s:
information, advice, research, evidence, knowledge, progress, equipment, furniture, homework, news, traffic, accommodation, money, transport, pollution, behaviour, unemployment, weather, work

a useful advice	useful advice / a piece of advice
a research shows	research shows / a study shows
What a nice weather!	What nice weather!
I found a work	I found a job

Both, different meaning: experience / an experience · paper / a paper · education / a good education

- **Plurals:** a problem → problems / some problems
- **One determiner only:** ✗ a my friend → a friend of mine / one of my friends
- **Meals:** have breakfast, after lunch (but a quick lunch)
- **by + transport:** by car, by bus (but in a car)
- **What kind of** job…? — no a

Pairs people mix up

- **a few / few:** I have a few friends (some) · Few people use it (hardly any) — same for a little / little
- **a / one:** one brother and two sisters — when the number matters
- **a / the:** A man came in. The man was tall.

Fixed phrases with a

make a decision · make a mistake · have a look · take a break · take a risk · have a chance · play a role in · as a result · as a rule · for a while · for a long time · all of a sudden · on a daily basis · it's a pity · have a headache · have a cold

Quick test — a, an or nothing?

1. My sister is ___ architect.
2. There was ___ significant increase in ___ unemployment.
3. I go to the gym three times ___ week.
4. It takes ___ hour to get to work.
5. ___ few people agree with this idea, so it is rarely discussed.
6. He is ___ honest and ___ hard-working person.

Answers: 1 an architect · 2 a significant increase, unemployment (no article) · 3 a week · 4 an hour · 5 Few (hardly anyone) · 6 an honest, no second article