A or An? Listening for the Sound Behind the Switch (Year 1)

Key points

- The words 'a' and 'an' both mean 'one', and English chooses between them by how the next word sounds when spoken aloud.
- We use 'an' before a word that begins with a vowel sound (the sounds made by a, e, i, o and u), such as 'an umbrella' or 'an egg'.
- We use 'a' before a word that begins with a consonant sound (any sound that isn't a vowel sound), even when the spelling starts with a vowel letter, so we say 'a unicorn' because it begins with a 'y' sound.
- Children often choose by the spelling rather than the sound, so 'an unicorn' can look right to them, and this is a normal step in learning.
- Some words start with a silent letter, such as 'an hour', so listening to the sound matters more than looking at the first letter.
- Hearing and saying the phrase first, as children do when learning phonics (linking letters to their sounds), helps the written choice feel natural and makes their sentences flow more smoothly.

Things to try at home

- Play 'Sound Detectives': say a word such as 'apple', 'dog' or 'egg' aloud, and ask your child to put 'a' or 'an' in front of it.
- Go on a 'What's in the bag?' hunt: pull out a few everyday objects and say 'It's an ___' or 'It's a ___' together, with lots of giggles if you get it wrong.
- Make up silly pairs such as 'a unicorn', 'an umbrella' or 'a yo-yo', and take turns guessing which word needs which article.
- On a walk, spot things and say them aloud, such as 'a tree', 'an ant' or 'a bus', and notice together which sound you hear first.
- If your child enjoys writing, they could copy a favourite phrase onto a sticky note for the fridge, but there's no need to write anything if they would rather just talk about it.

Find out more

- GOV.UK, 'National curriculum in England: English programmes of study' (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study), which sets out what children are expected to learn in English.
- GOV.UK, 'National curriculum' (https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum), an overview of the subjects taught in England's schools.
- Your child's class teacher or school: ask how 'a' and 'an' are taught in Year 1, as schools organise their teaching in different ways and the teacher can suggest ways to practise at home.