

What Is a Vowel?

In English, the letters **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, and **u** are called vowels and all the other letters are called consonants.

A word can begin with a vowel or it can begin with a vowel sound. For example, the word **article** begins with the vowel **a**. On the other hand, the word **honest** begins with the consonant **h** but when pronounced it produces an **o** sound (as in the word **order**).

With such words—beginning with a vowel or a vowel sound—the indefinite article **an** should be used instead of the indefinite article **a**. Look at this example:

Incorrect: **A MRI study** was performed.

Correct: **An MRI study** was performed.

When MRI is read out aloud, the first letter produces an **em** sound, as though it begins with the vowel **e**. Therefore, it should be preceded by the article **an**.

Further, even when words begin with a, e, i, o, or u, the article **a** is used instead of **an** if the initial sound belongs to a consonant. Look at the following example:

Incorrect: This is **an useful** method.

Correct: This is **a useful** method.

Although the word **useful** begins with the vowel **u**, it produces an initial sound that belongs to the consonant **y** (as in the word **youth**). Therefore, it should be preceded by the article **a** rather than **an**.