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The Indefinite Article

The word *a* is known as the **indefinite article**. You use it before a singular noun to refer to any example of that noun, or to avoid being specific about which example you mean:

a school
a woman

The word *an* is used instead of *a* when a word begins with a vowel sound:

an elephant
an umpire

The word *an* is also used instead of *a* when words sound as though they begin with a vowel:

an hour
an honour

The word *a* is used instead of *an* when words that begin with a vowel sound as though they begin with a consonant:

a union
a European

Also look at the grammar box at **the**.

a or **an** **ADJECTIVE** The indefinite article 'a', or 'an' if the next sound is a vowel, is used when you are talking about one of something • *an apple* • *There was a car parked behind the hedge.*

▶ SEE GRAMMAR BOX ABOVE

a- or **an-** **PREFIX** ① When 'a-' comes before an adjective it adds the meaning 'without' or 'opposite to'. 'An-' is the form used before a vowel • *amoral*. ② When 'a-' comes at the beginning of certain words it adds the meaning 'towards' or 'in the state of' • *aback* • *asleep*.

aardvark, **aardvarks** **NOUN** an ant-eating African animal with a long snout.

WORD HISTORY: from obsolete Afrikaans meaning 'earth pig'

aback **ADVERB** If you are taken aback, you are very surprised.

abacus, **abacuses** **NOUN** a frame with beads that slide along rods, used for counting.

abalone, **abalones** [*Said ab-a-lone-ee*] **NOUN** a shellfish which can be eaten.

abandon, **abandons**, **abandoning**, **abandoned** **VERB** ① If you abandon someone or something, you leave them or give them up for good.

▶ **NOUN** ② If you do something with abandon, you do it in an uncontrolled way • *He began to laugh*

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with abandon. **abandoned** ADJECTIVE
abandonment NOUN

SIMILAR WORDS: ① desert, forsake, leave

abate, abates, abating, abated VERB
If something abates, it becomes less
• *His anger abated.*

abattoir, abattoirs [Said *ab-a-twahr*]
NOUN a place where animals are killed for meat.

abbey, abbeys NOUN a church with buildings attached to it in which monks or nuns live.

abbot, abbots NOUN the monk or priest in charge of all the monks in a monastery.

abbreviate, abbreviates, abbreviating, abbreviated VERB To abbreviate something is to make it shorter.

abbreviation, abbreviations NOUN a short form of a word or phrase. An example is 'W', which is short for 'West'.

abdicate, abdicates, abdicating, abdicated VERB If a king or queen abdicates, he or she gives up being a king or queen. **abdication** NOUN

abdomen, abdomens NOUN the front part of your body below your chest, containing your stomach and intestines. **abdominal** ADJECTIVE

abduct, abducts, abducting, abducted VERB To abduct someone is to take them away by force. **abduction** NOUN

aberration, aberrations NOUN something that is not normal or usual.

abet, abets, abetting, abetted VERB If you abet someone, you help them to do something • *You've aided and abetted criminals to evade justice.*

abhor, abhors, abhorring, abhorred VERB (formal) If you abhor something, you hate it. **abhorrence** NOUN **abhorrent** ADJECTIVE

abide, abides, abiding, abided VERB ① If you can't abide something, you dislike it very much. ② If you abide by a decision or law, you act in agreement with it.

abiding ADJECTIVE lasting for ever • *an abiding interest in history.*

ability, abilities NOUN [PSHE] the intelligence or skill needed to do something • *the ability to get on with others.*

SIMILAR WORDS: capability, proficiency, skill

object ADJECTIVE very bad • *object failure.* **objectly** ADVERB

ablaze ADJECTIVE on fire.

able, abler, ablest ADJECTIVE [PSHE] ① If you are able to do something, you can do it. ② Someone who is able is very clever or talented.

-able SUFFIX ① forming adjectives which have the meaning 'capable of' an action • *enjoyable* • *breakable*. ② forming adjectives with the meaning 'able to' or 'causing' • *comfortable* • *miserable*.

SPELLING TIP

When you are writing, it is easy to confuse the *-able* suffix with its other form, *-ible*. It can be helpful to know that the *-able* spelling is much commoner than *-ible*, and that you cannot make new words using *-ible*. Occasionally, it is correct to use either ending.

ably [Said *ay-blee*] ADVERB skilfully and successfully • *He is ably supported by the cast.*