French nasal vowels: in, an, on

A simple rule will explain to you when a vowel “locks” with an N or an M to form a nasale sound, as in “cousin” or is pronounced with the vowel sound and the N or M sound, as in “cousine”. So don’t just wing it, make sure you understand why we pronounce it the way we do, and train on these quiet weird, yet very useful sounds. Lots of my students have difficulties figuring out when a vowel followed by N or M will combine to form a nasal sound (like cousin - coo zIN), or when to distinctly pronounce the sounds “N” or “M” (like cousine - coo zee n).

The main idea is that, to show a nasal sound in writing, you will write a vowel followed by N or M. The French language could have chosen another sign to express this as a nasal vowel sound, it would have been much easier, but they chose a combination of vowel and N or M. Now, the trick is to be able to recognize them. The main rule is; when used alone (such as in words like un, on, an) or followed by a consonant (except another N or M), vowels and N or M will combine to form a nasal sound. But let me explain a bit more.

How to pronounce a nasal sound?

In these nasal vowels, the N or M is only there in writing to indicate that this is a nasal sound; it is never pronounced like N or M. You only hear a nasal vowel sound. These do not exist in English. Try to pronounce the plain vowel while pinching your nose; after, you can actually speak like that by using a muscle in the back of your mouth. A good idea is to practice in front of a mirror. The shape of your mouth is really the condition for the right sound.

[IN]
i + nasal (lips on the side like a smile)
Can be spelled in, im, ain, aim, un, ym, yen, ein, and ien (do pronounce the i and then the [IN])
intéressant, important, train, faim, un, sympathique, moyen, peinture, chien.
Note that UM is usually pronounced the latin way, U and M separately, like in calcium or aluminium.

[AN]
a + nasal (lips open wide in a square)
Can be spelled en, em, an, am, aon.
enfant, temps, an, ambiance, paon.

[ON]
o + nasal (lips rounded and almost closed)
Can be spelled on and om.
pont, ombre.

[OIN]
o + nasal [IN]
loin, point.
So, nasal or not?

When used alone (such as in words like an, on, un) or followed by a consonant (except another N or M), these vowel and N or M will combine to form a nasal sound. There are 3 main cases:

a) Nasal alone, or at the beginning of a word, followed by a consonant (except N or M).
- an, on, un, en,
- IMportant, ONcle, AMple, INtéressant.

b) Nasal at the end of a word, or followed by a consonant (except N or M, and the ending “ent” in a verb which is always silent).
- pAON, amérICAIN, sON,
- tEMps, rONd, sONt, pEINt, intéressANt

c) Nasal in the middle of a word, locked between 2 consonants.
- intEMpérie, orANge, bONjour.

So as you now understand, it is really the following consonant that allows the nasal to lock into one.

Now, the golden rule: Whenever a consonant is followed by a vowel, this consonant will be pronounced.

ex: say intéressant (t is silent), but intéressante (t is pronounced).

Based on this rule, whenever an N or an M are followed by a vowel (or another N or M and then a vowel), these N and M will have to be pronounced. And if they are pronounced, they cannot be nasal. So you’ll pronounce the vowel and the N or M separately.

ex: cousin (IN nasal) but cousine (i,n)
américain (IN) but américaine (è,n)
un, but uni (u, n, i)
inaperçue (i,n,a)
aime (ê,m)

When a nasal is followed by an N or an M, these will be sort of “transparent”, so if there is a vowel after, it will break the nasal apart.

ex: Anne (a,n)
innactif (i,n,a....)
bonne (b,o,n)
immortel (i,m,o,r....)
viennent (v,i, ê,n) remember, ent is always silent in a verb.

So to sum it up:

a,i,u,o,e + n or m + a,i,u,o,e,y = not nasal (cousine)
a,i,u,o,e + n or m + nothing or consonnant (except n or m) = nasal (cousin)