The Hyphen


Hyphens link two or more words functioning as a single word, separate word parts to clarify meaning, and divide words at the end of lines. (Harbrace Handbook, 3rd ed.)

Certain types of compound words, and certain prefixes and suffixes, require the use of a hyphen to indicate that the hyphenated word is one unit with one meaning. In some cases at the end of a line of text, hyphens can also be used to divide words. (LB Brief, 5th ed., 2014)

Tips
- Have a dictionary handy.
- DO NOT put spaces between the hyphen and the words.
- Hyphens can be used in a variety of ways. This handout will focus on hyphen use in formal academic writing.

Hyphen Usage

1. Use a hyphen to link two or more words.
Use a hyphen to join two adjectives that come before a noun if they serve as a single adjective.
- A well-known politician went to jail yesterday.
  The politician that went to jail yesterday was well known.

Do not use a hyphen if the adjectives you are thinking about joining are separate ideas.

- My little niece, Emily, is a bright young thing. (Bright and Young are two separate ideas.)

Do not use hyphens after adverbs ending in –ly.

- The party was a poorly planned event.
Compounds that have verb and noun forms should appear as separate words when used as verbs and as one word when used as nouns.

- At that rate, the engine will **break down** soon.
- We suffered a **breakdown** in communication.

Hyphenate a two-word modifier that begins with *-ly* if that modifier serves as an adjective that works with the word that comes after it.

- There goes a **friendly-looking** man. (hyphenation, since “friendly” modifies “looking” and is an adjective describing “man”)
- You sure are a **friendly little** girl. (no hyphenation, since “friendly” does not act as one idea with “little”)
- This is a very **brightly lit** room. (no hyphenation, since “brightly” is an adverb and does not modify “room”)

Hyphenate two or more words acting as a noun.

- My mother gave me a let-him-do-it look when my brother tried to pour his own juice this morning.

Use a hyphen when you improvise compound words.

- I felt the leveling-off of the plane beneath me.
- My brother-in-law is hilarious.
- Jon is a jack-of-all-trades.

2. **Use a hyphen to unify prefixes joined to capitalized words.** (Use the hyphen to separate a prefix from a proper noun.) Exception: transatlantic

- anti-French
- post-Civil War
- trans-North American
- non-Islamic
- pro-Israeli
- ultra-Communist
- pan-German
- pseudo-Christian
- un-American

3. **Use a hyphen to unify single capital letters joined to nouns or participles.**

- A-flat
- I-beam
- U-turn
- C-span
- S-curve
- V-neck
- H-bomb
- T-square
- X-ray

4. **Use a hyphen to unify most compounds having brother, father, mother, sister, etc. as the first element.**

- brother-workers
- fellow-citizen
- parent-teacher
- father-in-law
- mother-of-pearl
- sister-cities

However, many compounds beginning with the above words are *not* hyphenated.

- mother tongue
- mother church
- sister ship
5. Use a hyphen between the parts of compound numerals from twenty-one to ninety-nine.
   • thirty-eight     • fifty-five     • seventy-three

6. Use a hyphen in fractions if they are written out, but omit the hyphen if one already appears in either the numerator or the denominator.
   • fifty-eight ninety-sevenths     • two-thirds     • sixty-thousandths

7. Use a hyphen between a numbered figure and its unit of measurement, or for clarity in compound modifiers.
   • 6-foot shark     • family-owned business     • purple-faced tycoon
   • 5-yard gain     • 500-milligram dose     • 10-day vacation

8. Use a hyphen to unify most compounds having *ex* or *self* as the first element.
   • ex-serviceman     • self-control
   • ex-vice-president     • self-respect

   However, some compounds beginning with *ex* or *self* are not hyphenated.
   • excommunicate     • selfsame

9. Use a hyphen to avoid doubling a vowel or tripling a consonant.
   • anti-imperialistic     • bell-like

10. The hyphen is sometimes used after a prefix ending in a vowel when the prefix is followed by the same vowel. This use is becoming less common, however, and the hyphen may be omitted in words that are used frequently and are readily recognized without it.
    • Reelect, reenter, preeminent, reevaluate, cooperate
    • Anti-intellectual, pro-oleomargarine

11. Use a hyphen to prevent misunderstanding or mispronunciation, or to distinguish the meaning of different words that are spelled the same way.
    • re-cover as distinguished from recover
    • re-creation as distinguished from recreation
    • re-treat as distinguished from retreat
    • re-sent as distinguished from resent

12. Use a suspensive (carrying-over) hyphen when the first, second, or more parts of a compound word are separated from the word(s) to which they are joined in meaning.
• This was a group of six- and seven-year-olds.
• The 5- and 6-year-olds attend morning classes.
• There were both anti- and pro-choice advocates at the rally.
• Marcos bought some 6-, 8-, and 10-penny nails.

13. **Use a hyphen (or hyphens) to indicate the structure or spelling of a word.**
   • Rafael was puzzled why the common letters in the words r-o-u-g-h, c-o-u-g-h, t-h-r-o-u-g-h, and t-h-o-u-g-h are pronounced so differently.
   • The prefix of this word should be p-r-e, not p-e-r.
   • If you have a lot of s-e-n-s-e, you should be able to make a lot of c-e-n-t-s.

14. **Use a hyphen with most telephone numbers.**
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