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GRAMMAR TIPS

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Hyphen

What Is a Hyphen?

A hyphen (-) is a punctuation mark that's used to join words or parts of words. It's not interchangeable with other types of dashes.

Use a hyphen in a compound modifier when the modifier comes *before* the word it's modifying.

If you're not sure whether a compound word has a hyphen or not, check your preferred dictionary.

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Hyphen with Compound Modifiers: Two-Word Adjectives Before Nouns

Using hyphens to connect words is easy. Picking the right words to connect is a little harder. Let's start with compound modifiers.

A compound modifier is made up of two words that work together to function like one adjective. When you connect words with the hyphen, you make it clear to readers that the words work together as a unit of meaning.

Incorrect

It's recommended you don't take down any load bearing walls when renovating.

EXHIBIT 1



we're talking about walls that are bearing a load.

Correct It's recommended you don't take down any load-bearing walls when renovating.

Correct This rock-hard cake is absolutely impossible to eat.

Correct We're looking for a dog-friendly hotel.

Generally, you need the hyphen only if the two words are functioning together as an adjective *before* the noun they're describing. If the noun comes first, leave the hyphen out.

Correct This wall is load bearing.

Correct It's impossible to eat this cake because it is rock hard.

Correct Is this hotel dog friendly?

You also don't need a hyphen when your modifier is made up of an adverb and an adjective.

Incorrect Do you expect me to believe this clearly-impossible story?

Correct Do you expect me to believe this clearly impossible story?

Hyphens With Participles

Compound modifiers that include present or past participles follow the same rules as any other compound modifier.

Hyphen With a Noun, Adjective Or Adverb and a Present Participle

When we combine a noun or adjective and a present participle (a word ending in -ing) to form a unit of meaning that describes another word, use a hyphen to make that unit of meaning clear.

Incorrect There are some beautiful looking flowers in the garden.

Without the hyphen between *beautiful* and *looking*, your reader may stumble over the sentence. Perhaps there's a new type of daisy called the "looking flower"?

Example There are some beautiful-looking flowers in the garden.

Example Fast-acting medication can be useful when one has a headache.

Don't use a hyphen when the modifier comes *after* the noun it's describing.

Example This medication is fast acting.

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Incorrect The room was like a heavily-decorated chocolate box.

Correct The room was like a heavily decorated chocolate box.

Hyphen in a Compound Expression With a Noun and Past Participle

Compound modifiers that contain a past participle also follow the same rules as any other compound modifier. Use a hyphen when the compound goes before the noun it modifies:

Example The municipal government is funding a community-based education system.

Example Wind-powered generators can be excellent sources of electricity.

Example Many veterinarians find meat-fed cats to be quite healthy.

Example A well-known local singer will perform tonight.

Don't use a hyphen when the compound comes after the noun it describes.

Example The singer performing tonight is well known.

Hyphenated Compound Words

Hyphenated compound words are the ones (obviously) with a hyphen between the words. Over time, many hyphenated compounds become closed compounds—*teen-ager* became *teenager* for instance. Check a dictionary if you're not sure whether to use a hyphen or not. Here are a few examples of common hyphenated compound words:

Example Mother-in-law

Example Master-at-arms

Example Editor-in-chief

Example Ten-year-old

Example Factory-made

Example Twelve-pack

Closed Compound Words

Hyphenated words tend to become closed compounds (single words with no hyphens) over time. *Email* instead of *e-mail*, for example, is increasingly common. If you aren't sure whether a word is a closed compound or a hyphenated one, check your preferred dictionary.

Example Notebook

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Example Bookstore

Example Fireman

Open Compound Words

Open compounds are typically made up of two nouns that are used together to represent a single idea. “Open” means that there is a space between the two words and no hyphen. A good dictionary is the best place to check whether a compound is open or not.

Example Living room

Example Real estate

Example Dinner table

Example Coffee mug

Hyphens and Numbers

Numbers between *twenty-one* and *ninety-nine* should be hyphenated when they’re spelled out.

Example Fifty-six bottles of pop on the wall, fifty-six bottles of pop...

Example No, I won’t party “like it’s nineteen ninety-nine.”

Example I’ve got a hundred and twenty-two of these gizmos to sell.

Hyphen in Compound Adjective With Numbers

When numbers are used as the first part of a compound adjective, use a hyphen to connect them to the noun that follows them. This way, the reader knows that both words function like a unit to modify another noun. This applies whether the number is written in words or in digits.

Example The president of the company gave a 10-minute speech to the Board of Directors.

Example He is knowledgeable in thirteenth-century politics.

Example The boy threw a rock at the second-story window.

However, a hyphen is not required if the number is the second word in the compound adjective.

Example He is a victim of Type 2 diabetes.



Hyphen In Compound Adjective With Fractions

When using a fraction (e.g. half or quarter) as part of a compound adjective, it should be hyphenated so the reader understands which fraction is modifying which noun.

- Example I half-wanted to commit a felony.
- Example A quarter-million dollars is still a large amount of money.
- Example You'll need one-third of a pound of flour and one egg.
- Example That's a half-baked idea if I ever heard one!

Hyphen With Prefixes: Ex-, Self-, All-

Use a hyphen with the prefix *ex-* (meaning *former*).

- Example Don't sit Adam next to Martha! She's his ex-wife!
- Example Though he no longer held an official position, the ex-mayor still attended all the town's functions.

Use a hyphen with the reflexive prefix *self-*.

- Example Lying on the floor beside the plant he had knocked over and chewed on, the cat looked extremely self-satisfied.
- Example Do you want a self-serve or a full-serve gas station?

Make sure you don't confuse the prefix *self-* with the noun *self*.

- Example The self serves no other.

When using *all* as a prefix, add a hyphen.

- Example It's a bad leader who thinks of himself as all-powerful.

Hyphens with *High* or *Low*

When using *high* or *low* as part of a compound adjective, use a hyphen when the compound comes before the noun it's modifying. Some examples of compound adjectives using *high* and *low* include *high-level/low-level* and *high-impact/low-impact*.

- Example Low-flying airplanes contribute to the noise pollution in the area.
- Example This car runs best on high-octane gasoline.
- Example Low-income families often face more stress than their higher-income counterparts.