

Mastering Hyphens

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Some of the following content was borrowed from: <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/hyphen>
and from: <https://www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/hyphens.asp>

What the heck is a hyphen?

A single (short) dash that joins two words or two parts of a word.

Not the same thing as an *em dash* or an *en dash*!

Hyphen: family-owned cafe

Em dash: Upon discovering the errors—all 124 of them—the publisher immediately recalled the books.

1. Use a Hyphen for a Compound Modifier

(two words that work together to make one adjective to describe something):

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

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.

Correct: A state-of-the-art design

BUT... you only do this when the two-word adjective comes *before* the noun, not *after* the noun.

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?

AND... you don't use a hyphen when the two-word modifier includes an *adjective and an adverb*

Correct: a seemingly impossible task. **Incorrect:** a seemingly-impossible task.

(*seemingly* is an adverb, *impossible* is an adjective)

Basically, the easiest way to remember this is: if the first of the two words is *very* or ends in *ly*, do not hyphenate. So...

Incorrect: *the very-elegant watch*

Correct: *the very elegant watch*

Incorrect: *the finely-tuned watch*

Correct: *the finely tuned watch*

But... This rule applies only to adverbs. The following two examples are correct because the *ly* words are not adverbs:

Correct: *the friendly-looking dog*

Correct: *a family-owned cafe*

Remember, an **adverb** is a modifier that expresses place, time, circumstance, cause, degree, etc.

Adjectives modify a noun, **adverbs** modify an adjective, verb, or other adverb.

2. Use Hyphens in many Compound Words (but not in others!)

Many compound words are normally hyphenated, such as:

Mother-in-law
Master-at-arms
Editor-in-chief
Ten-year-old
Factory-made
Twelve-pack

BUT... there are also many compound words that have been used so much that they have become *closed compound words* (without hyphens):

Notebook
Superman
Waistcoat
Bookstore
Fireman

It's actually easy to know which words to hyphenate—**LOOK THEM UP** in your favorite *online* dictionary (*not* an old print dictionary)

And then there are *open compound words* (with a space without a hyphen):

Living room
Real estate
Dinner table
Coffee mug

Again, it's easy to know which are which—LOOK THEM UP!

3. Using Hyphens with Numbers

This one's easy. Use a hyphen when you write (in words) any number between *twenty-one* and *ninety-nine*.

Sixty-three bottles of beer on the wall, sixty-three bottles of beer...
Great! Let's party like it's nineteen ninety-nine!
I have one thousand two hundred twenty-one dollars.

And YES, you still hyphenate when a number is the first word of a two-word adjective:

The boy threw a rock at the second-story window.
He gave a 10-minute speech to the Board of Directors.

AND... you hyphenate when a fraction is part of a two-word adjective:

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

However, for some strange reason, you do not hyphenate *half brother* or *half sister*.

4. Using Hyphens with Certain Prefixes

Always use a hyphen with the following prefixes: *Ex-*, *Self-*, and *All-*

Ex- She's his ex-wife.
The ex-mayor still attended all the town's functions.

Self- The cat looked extremely self-satisfied.
Do you want a self-serve or a full-serve gas station?
I am self-employed.

All- A president should not believe he is all-powerful.
I wish I were all-knowing.

5. Use Hyphens when Creating *Original* Compound Verbs or Nouns

This is often done for humor, or for vivid descriptions.

Verbs: The slacker video-gamed his way through life.
Queen Victoria throne-sat for six decades.

Nouns: I changed my diet and became a no-meater.
Queen Victoria was a lazy throne-sitter.

6. Hyphens are often used to tell the ages of people and things

We have a two-year-old child. (*Incorrect: We have a two-year old child.*)
We have a two-year-old.

But... do not hyphenate this: The child is two years old.
Or this: The child is one year old.

7. Always add a Hyphen if it Eliminates a Problem

Confusing: Springfield has little town charm.
Much better: Springfield has little-town charm.
Confusing: She had a concealed weapons permit.
Much better: She had a concealed-weapons permit.

8. When in Doubt, LOOK IT UP

I frequently use: <https://www.dictionary.com> and <https://www.merriam-webster.com>