

Hyphen Rules

The **hyphen** (-) is a punctuation mark used to join words.

It is often confused with **dashes** (-, —, —), which are longer and have different uses, and with the minus sign (-) which is also longer.

Rule One:

Most often, you will hyphenate between two or more adjectives when they come before a noun and act as a single idea. This is the most common use of the hyphen.

Examples: **friendly-looking** man
(Hyphenate: compound adjective in front of a noun)

friendly little girl
(Do not hyphenate: not a compound adjective)

brightly lit room
(Do not hyphenate: *Brightly* is an adverb describing *lit*, not an adjective.)

Rule Two:

When adverbs not ending in *-ly* are used as compound words in front of a noun, hyphenate the words. When the combination of words is used after the noun, do not hyphenate the words.

Examples: The **well-known** actress accepted her award.
(Hyphenate: *Well* is an adverb followed by another descriptive word. They combine to form one idea in front of the noun.)

 The actress who accepted her award was well known.
(Do not hyphenate: **Well known** follows the noun it describes, so no hyphen is used.)

 A **long-anticipated** decision was finally made.

 He got a **much-needed** haircut yesterday.

 His haircut was **much needed**.

Rule Three:

To check whether a compound noun is two words, one word, or hyphenated, you will want to look it up in the dictionary. If you can't find the word in the dictionary, treat the noun as separate words.

Examples: **eyewitness**, **eye shadow**, **eye-opener**

Rule Four:

Phrases that have verb, noun, and adjective forms should appear as separate words when used as verbs and as one word when used as nouns or adjectives.

Examples: The engine will eventually **break down**. (verb)

We suffered a **breakdown** in communications. (noun)

Please **clean up** your room. (verb)

That Superfund site will require specialized **cleanup** procedures.
(adjective)

Rule Five:

Compound verbs are either hyphenated or appear as one word. If you do not find the verb in the dictionary, hyphenate it.

Examples: To **air-condition** the house will be costly.

We were notified that management will **downsize** the organization next year.

Rule Six:

Remember to use a comma, and not a hyphen, between two adjectives when you could have used *and* instead.

Examples: I have important, classified documents.

Jennifer received a lovely, fragrant bouquet on Valentine's Day.

Rule Seven:

Hyphenate all compound numbers from twenty-one through ninety-nine.

Examples: The teacher had **thirty-two** children in her classroom.

Only **twenty-one** of the children were bilingual.

Rule Eight:

Hyphenate all spelled-out fractions.

Examples: You need **one-third** of a cup of sugar for that recipe.

More than **one-half** of the student body voted for removing soda machines from campus.