

HYPHENS VERSUS DASHES

Punctuation



ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT

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HYPHENS (-)

Hyphens are used:

- To form certain *compound words*
- To form certain *compound adjectives*
- To form fractions, compound numbers, and word-number combinations
- To attach certain prefixes and suffixes to words
- To avoid awkward letter combinations
- To clarify certain word meanings

1. Compound Words:

Compound words are words made up of two or more combined words. Certain compound words are hyphenated while others are written as one word or two separate words. To know which words are written with hyphens, consult a dictionary.

◦ *good-bye* ◦ *part-time* ◦ *man-made*

BUT

◦ *likewise* ◦ *airtight* ◦ *course work* ◦ *post office*

2. Compound Adjectives:

Compound adjectives are two or more words that function as a single adjective.

Compound adjectives are hyphenated when they appear before the noun they modify.

Many consider Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to be an exceedingly *well-written* novel. (*Well-written* modifies the noun *novel*)

The *sixty-year-old* policy was thrown out after a *much-needed* revision.

BUT hyphens are not used when the adjective follows the noun it modifies.

The novel *Pride and Prejudice* is very *well written*.

The policy's revision was thought to be *much needed* since it was *sixty years old*.

AND hyphens are not used in compound adjectives that begin with adverbs ending in *-ly*—even if they precede a noun

Epidemiologists warned the public of the dangers of the *highly contagious* disease.

Note: When more than one adjective modifies the same last term, that term should appear only once at the end of the sentence.

Chaucer's writing influenced many *eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century* poets.

3. Fractions, Compound Numbers, and Word-number Combinations:

Hyphens are used to express fractions in writing.

Alzheimer's Disease affects greater than *one-ninth* of the population aged 65 and older.

Hyphens are required when writing numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine. BUT no hyphens are used beyond that range

◦ *fifty-two* ◦ *thirty-third* ◦ *one hundred*

Hyphens also link words to numerical values.

◦ *5000-pound* ◦ *300-day* ◦ *700-metre*



4. Hyphenated Prefixes and Suffixes:

The prefixes: *all-*, *great-*, *self-*, and *ex-* (as-in former), and the suffix *-elect* are always attached to nouns with a hyphen.

- *all-time* ◦ *great-grandfather*
- *self-esteem* ◦ *ex-girlfriend* ◦ *president-elect*

The prefixes: *pro-*, *anti-*, *pre-*, *post-*, and *un-*, on the other hand are only hyphenated when they are attached to proper nouns.

- *pro-Canadian* ◦ *anti-Republican* ◦ *pre-Victorian*
- *post-World War I* ◦ *un-American*

BUT no hyphens are used when connecting them to common nouns

- *probiotic* ◦ *antiwar* ◦ *prehistory* ◦ *posthumous*
- *unconventional*

5. Awkward Letter Combinations and Clarifications:

Hyphens can also be used to avoid awkward combinations of letters and syllables.

Re-establish (instead of *reestablish*)

Sometimes, the presence of a hyphen is necessary to change the meaning of a word, or to prevent misreading.

After the secretary misplaced her forms, she had to *re-sign* the papers. (Re-sign: to sign again, NOT resign: to give up)

6. Words over Two Lines of Text:

When there is not enough space to write out a word at the end of a line of text a hyphen can be used to split the word between two lines.

Note: The hyphen should appear between two syllables, leaving at least three letters of the word on each line and it should be written at the end of the first line (not the beginning of the second).

The decision was made by the Federal gov-
ernment.

OR The decision was made by the Federal govern-
ment.

NOT The decision was made by the Federal gove
-rment.

DASHES (—)

Note: No spaces should appear before or after the dash.

Dashes are used:

- To give an explanation
- To separate *appositives* from the main sentence
- To emphasise a point
- To introduce a list or to add a comment following a list
- To express an interruption in a character's thoughts or dialogue
- To indicate a dramatic shift in tone

There it was—the Statue of Liberty.

NOT There it was — the Statue of Liberty.

1. Explanations and Appositives:

Dashes are used to separate an explanation or an *appositive* (a brief definition that explains the noun it follows) from the rest of the sentence.

To determine how much energy is lost to the environment, one must measure the system's enthalpy—the difference between the potential energy of the reactants and that of the products.

Ms. Simon—editor-in-chief of the local paper, chairwoman of the Parent-Teacher committee, and mother of four—had little time to herself.

2. Emphasis:

Dashes are also useful when emphasising nonessential information.

They walked on foot—through the bitter rain and wind—until they reached the house.

3. Lists:

Dashes can be used, similarly to a colon, to introduce a list, or to insert a comment following a list.

Nucleic acids contain one of the five nitrogenous bases—Cytosine, Thymine, Uracil, Adenine, or Guanine.

Researching nation political systems, analyzing policies and laws, predicting social and political trends—the roles of a political scientist are diverse.

4. Interruptions:

Dashes can communicate a deviation from a character's train of thought or an interruption in their dialogue in a story.

His daughter was late—no surprise there—so he would have to start supper without her again.

“We’re studying William Shakespeare in English now. He wrote—”

“I know who Shakespeare is!”

5. Dramatic Shifts:

Dashes can also be used to communicate a shift in tone or to introduce a dramatic turn of events.

She pulled on her coat, waved good-bye to her coworkers as she left, climbed into her car—and burst into tears.



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