Hyphens

Although hyphens and dashes look similar, they differ in length and purpose. Hyphens (-) are shorter and are used to show connections between words that are working as a unit, while dashes (—) are longer and are used to emphasize a word or phrase. Certain compound words should never be hyphenated (e.g., straightforward, setback), whereas unhyphenated and hyphenated versions of the same words exist, such as *co-operate* and *cooperate*. Given that hyphen usage is constantly changing, check an up-to-date dictionary for current usage.

1. Use hyphens with age as an adjective phrase **before** the noun.

The 12-year-old swimmer has broken many records. (= age as an adjective **before** the noun)
Her twin daughters are eight years old. (= age as an adjective **after** the noun)

2. When an age acts as a noun, use hyphens.

That 70-year-old is an avid golfer.

3. Hyphenate all written-out fractions.

A one-quarter cup of liquid	A half is slightly less than three-fifths.

4. Use a hyphen to replace the word *to* between a pair of numbers indicating a range.

pages 40-45	October 23-28

If you introduce the range with *from*, use the word *to* instead of a hyphen. Similarly, if you use *between*, use the word *and* instead of a hyphen.

from pages 40 to 45	between October 23 and 28

5. Use hyphens with prefixes before proper adjectives and nouns.

all-Canadian	un-American	trans-Siberian
post-Victorian	pre-Babylonian	neo-Marxist

Examples of some exceptions: antichrist, transatlantic, transpacific.

6. Use hyphens with *great* and *in-law* in compound nouns designating family relationships.

great-aunt	great-grandmother	father-in-law	brother-in-law

7. Use hyphens with the suffixes *elect* and *designate.*

president-elect	minister-designate

8. Use hyphens with compound adjectives beginning with the prefix *self, ex, all, vice,* and *by.*

self-esteem	self-made	self-explanatory	ex-husband	ex-convict
all-purpose	vice-principal	vice-president	by-product	by-election

Examples of some exceptions: selfish, selfless, bygone, bylaw, bystander. Check your dictionary.

9. Use hyphens to provide clarity between two similar words.

Check out the sale on bubblegum at the *check-out* counter.
You must *re-sign* the letter now that you've *resigned* from your job.

10. Use hyphens to prevent awkward or confusing combinations of letters.

Semi-independent (not *semiindependent*)
Doll-like (not *dolllike*)

11. Some nouns composed of two or more words are conventionally hyphenated.

free-for-all	half-and-half	jack-o-lantern	runner-up
merry-go-round	shut-in	drop-in	paper-pusher

12. Use hyphens to join two or more words acting as a single adjective **before** a noun.

middle-class values	once-in-a-lifetime chance	slow-moving train
chocolate-covered raisins	sugar-laden breakfast cereal	pet-friendly beaches

13. Some compound modifiers retain their hyphens even when they come after their nouns.

She heard that the new mayor was good-looking and open-minded.
The tone of his discourse is matter-of-fact.

14. Use a suspension hyphen after the first of two prefixes that modify one root.

The teller can pre- or postdate the cheques.