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 nouns.

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

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>self-esteem</th>
<th>self-made</th>
<th>self-explanatory</th>
<th>ex-husband</th>
<th>ex-convict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>all-purpose</td>
<td>vice-principal</td>
<td>vice-president</td>
<td>by-product</td>
<td>by-election</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>free-for-all</th>
<th>half-and-half</th>
<th>jack-o-lantern</th>
<th>runner-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>merry-go-round</td>
<td>shut-in</td>
<td>drop-in</td>
<td>paper-pusher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>middle-class values</th>
<th>once-in-a-lifetime chance</th>
<th>slow-moving train</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chocolate-covered raisins</td>
<td>sugar-laden breakfast cereal</td>
<td>pet-friendly beaches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

Material adapted from:

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