

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 <u>before</u> the noun)

Her twin daughters are eight years old. (= age as an adjective <u>after</u> 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.
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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
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7) Use hyphens with the suffixes *elect* and *designate*.

president-elect	minister-designate
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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 <i>check-out</i> counter.
You must <i>re-sign</i> the letter now that you've <i>resigned</i> from your job.

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

Semi-independent (not <i>semiindependent</i>)
Doll-like (not <i>dolllike</i>)

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.
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Material adapted from:

Messenger, W. E., de Bruyn, J., Brown, J., & Montagnes, R. (Eds.). (2005). *The Canadian writer's handbook*. (4th Edition). Oxford University Press.

