

Using Hyphens

The hyphen (-) is used in some forms of compound words and numbers. The primary use of the hyphen is to indicate that two or more words or numbers are to be read together to create a single unit of meaning: moth-eaten; door-to-door; Latin-American; thirty-five.

Some compound words can be written as one word, or as two, or with a hyphen:

fairy tales fairy-tales fairytales
proof reading proof-reading proofreading

There is considerable disagreement about when to use the hyphen: 'its infinite variety defies description' (Fowler's *Modern English Usage*). If in doubt, check with a recent edition of a reputable dictionary. However you choose to use hyphens, be consistent. Here are some general rules that will act as a guide.

Using Hyphens in Words

In prefixes

Hyphens are used in prefixes in the following instances.

When the main word begins with a capital letter:

non-English speaking pre-Islamic

Doubling of a vowel:

pre-eminent re-elect

(Note that hyphens have now been dropped in some examples: coordinator)

Preceding a date:

post-1929 pre-1770

When the prefix ex means former:

ex-husband (*means former so use hyphen*) ex-president

Where two or more words are combined to make a single word

easy-to-read document two-act opera three-year-old children

Over time, some well-established compounds lose their hyphen:

widespread airborne

To prevent misreading and ambiguity

recover (*to get better or regain*) re-cover (*to cover again*)

recollect (*to remember*) re-collect (*to collect again*)

The forest near the hotel is reserved for shooting visitors.

The forest near the hotel is reserved for shooting-visitors.

Using Hyphens in Numbers

Compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine are hyphenated

Fifty-five six hundred and ninety-four

Use figures to avoid a hyphen in an already hyphenated compound:

a 32-year-old woman; not a thirty-two-year-old woman.

Spelled out fractions are hyphenated

She won by a two-thirds majority.

two and three-quarters

Century numbers

Don't use a hyphen when the number is an adjective describing century:

fiction developed rapidly in the nineteenth century.

Do use a hyphen when the number and the century are combined to create an adjective describing something else:

nineteenth-century fiction

thirteenth-century sculpture

Using Hyphens if Breaking a Word at the End of a Line

Try to avoid this if possible. If not, always divide words between syllables and never divide a word of one syllable