

Punctuating with Hyphens

The use of hyphens (e.g., free-to-air, with NO spaces between letters) is classed as ‘word punctuation’. Mostly, hyphens indicate that two or more words or numbers are to be read together (compound words) to create a single or new unit of meaning. **There are no simple rights and wrongs for hyphenating words.** You need to use a dictionary to check whether a compound expression is acceptable as separate words, as a joined-up single word, or as a hyphenated word. Even well-known dictionaries can follow different rules (e.g., from one dictionary: *eyeball*, *eye shadow*, *eye-catching*). If you cannot find the word in the dictionary, write as separate words. You will need to know about:

1. Hyphens in compound words
2. Hyphens to add prefixes
3. Hyphens in written numbers
4. Good resources for hyphens



SPELLING CHECKERS seldom help you with hyphenation by signalling that a compound word or number needs to be one word, two separate words, or hyphenated. The safest thing that you can do is consult an up-to-date dictionary (hard copy or online) to keep in touch with vanishing hyphens in words, for example *non-traditional* (now *nontraditional*), *e-mail* (now *email*), *on-line* (now *online*), and *socio-economic* (now *socioeconomic*).

1. Hyphens in compound words

A compound consists of two or more words that combine to make a new meaning. Compounds can be correctly written as separate words, with hyphens, or as one word (e.g., *fairy tales/ fairy-tales/fairytales*; *proof reading/proof-reading/proofreading*). Make your choice from a good Australian dictionary and be consistent.

Rule 1: Many compounds are now written as **one word** (without hyphens). If you write these words as two or more words instead of single words or use a hyphen, you are spelling these words incorrectly. There are over 2,000 one-word compound words.

Common one-word compounds

alongside, another, aftermath, anybody, background, beforehand, bookmaker, bypass, brainstorm, cannot, commonplace, downpour, elsewhere, everywhere, everything, however, input, keyboard, keypad, mainland, meantime, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, rattlesnake, roadblock, scarecrow, somewhat, spokesperson, stocktaking, therefore, underachievement, underdeveloped, underestimate, underground, update, upheaval, whatever, widespread, without

Rule 2: Use a hyphen to join most words that form a compound noun.

Examples

- ✓ Most truck transport is undertaken by owner-drivers.
- ✓ Sparta was a city-state in ancient Greece.
- ✓ The editor-in-chief of the newspaper was my mother-in-law.
- ✓ The transport minister gave the go-ahead for the road project.
- ✓ The athlete showed a single-mindedness of intent in his desire to win.

Rule 3: Use a hyphen to join most compound adjectives (descriptive words) that make a single meaning before or after the noun it is describing. However, when a hyphenated compound adjective is used as a compound noun, the hyphen is often not used.

Examples

- ✓ Research shows that accident-prone people are likely to be distracted and stressed.
- ✓ There is an alarming rise in self-induced injuries among young teenagers.
- ✓ It is a well-established fact that the teenage years can be emotionally turbulent.
- ✓ A decision to close the hospital had far-reaching implications for country people.
- ✓ The decision to close the hospital has implications that are far reaching.

- ✓ Health workers were striving to keep the community disease-free.

2. Hyphens to add prefixes

A prefix is a group of letters added in front of a word to change its meaning and form a new word (e.g., link > [hyperlink](#), ordinary > [extraordinary](#), national > [international](#)).

Common prefixes

anti, auto, bi, co, counter, di, dis, ex, extra, hyper, hypo, inter, intra, mis, neo, non, post, pro, re, semi, sub, super, supra, un

Rule 1: Only use hyphens to add prefixes to words when the prefix could be misread or be confused with another word.

Examples

- ✓ de-ice, de-emphasise, pre-eminent, re-enter, anti-aircraft, semi-official (**VOWEL CONFUSION**)
- ✓ resign/re-sign, recreation/re-creation, recover/re-cover (**AVOID CONFUSION BETWEEN WORDS**)

(e.g., resign=give up a job & re-sign=sign again; recreation=a fun activity & re-creation=exact reproduction; recover=get better & re-cover=cover again)

Rule 2: Use a hyphen in most cases when a prefix is followed by a capital letter or an expression in italics or quotes, when using co- (meaning joint) and ex- (meaning former), and when adding e- (for 'electronic').

Examples

- ✓ non-English speaking, un-Australian, pre-Christianity (**PREFIX FOLLOWED BY A CAPITAL LETTER**)
- ✓ take an anti-'reconciliation' stance (**PREFIX FOLLOWED BY AN EXPRESSION IN ITALICS OR QUOTES**)
- ✓ co-host of a show, ex-president of the company (but not coordinate) (**PREFIXES: CO- AND EX-**)
- ✓ e-book, e-resource, e-commerce (but not email) (**e- FOR ELECTRONIC**)

3. Hyphens in written numbers

When you use numbers in writing, there are a number of rules for using hyphens.

Rule 1: Hyphenate numbers and fractions that are written in words.

Examples

- ✓ twenty-seven, four hundred and fifty-five, thirty-six thousand (**NUMBERS IN WORDS**)
- ✓ one-quarter, three-halves, two and three-quarters (**FRACTIONS IN WORDS**)

Rule 2: Hyphenate compound adjectives that involve numbers.

Examples

- ✓ the 48-year-old film star, 3-year-old children, the five-part series, a 21-gun salute, the fifth-storey apartment (**COMPOUND ADJECTIVES WITH NUMBERS**)

Rule 3: Hyphenate dates, eras, and numbers in some writing contexts.

Examples

- ✓ when you use a prefix preceding a date e.g., post-1929, pre-1770
- ✓ when you use 'century' as a compound adjective e.g., 16th-century art (but art created in the 16th century)
- ✓ when you use the suffixes 'odd' after a number e.g., 2,000-odd people attended the rally, the purpose of the project was three-fold

4. Good resources for hyphens

Make sure that you have a good, up-to-date Australian dictionary that has been published in recent years. It is best to choose ONE dictionary and keep with the hyphenation practices of that publication. Good online dictionaries will give you the most up-to-date information.

Examples

- The *Macquarie Dictionary* 8th edition (2020)
- The *Macquarie Dictionary Online* (updated annually)
- The *Australian Oxford Dictionary* 5th edition (2019)