

The Vexed Question of Hyphenated Compounds (UK Usage)

I was recently asked for advice by a client on how to approach hyphenation, particularly hyphenated compounds when two or more words are joined together. This is an area where we can all hesitate from time to time, or blunder on regardless.

Confusingly, while there are some basic rules you can quickly assimilate, there are also word compounds that can be hyphenated, written out as two words, or even just plain joined together. Where do we begin?

First port of call

The simplest way forward is to check in a dictionary. Be aware, however, that different dictionaries can give conflicting information. Collins and Longman are perhaps the most up to date with hyphens, tending not to show the ones less in use these days. The online Collins dictionary will sometimes (but not always) give you the two versions if a word compound can use both. Try inputting each alternative to see if they are there. Whichever you choose, be consistent! One of my jobs as a proofreader is to check for consistency and I wouldn't immediately spring to delete a hyphen unless any of the principles given below were violated.

Some basic principles

Hyphenation is used to avoid the jarring effect of two consonants or vowels together:

<i>part-time</i>	not	<i>parttime</i>
<i>drip-proof</i>	not	<i>dripproof</i>

However, the following is correct:

<i>bookkeeper</i>	<i>breaststroke</i>	<i>earring</i>	<i>hitchhiker</i>
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If it looks strange, check it in a dictionary. It may well be alright to use.

Prefixes

As above, when you add a detachable prefix such as *anti-* or *semi-* the principle is: hyphenate if two vowels or consonants look weird together.

Anglo-	Anglo-American
anti-	anti-abortion
de-	de-escalate
ex-	ex-president
half-	half-hearted
mid-	mid-January
non-	non-profit-making (also non-profit-making) non-negotiable
post-	post-1960s
pre-	pre-existing
pro-	pro-European
quasi-	quasi-stellar
re-	re-examine re-elect re-advertise
self-	self-centred
semi-	semi-permanent semi-retired semi-skilled

New Hart's Rules (The Oxford Style Guide) gives three examples which contradict what I have just written, and at least two of them are common enough to merit a mention:

cooperate

coordinate

microorganism

Suffixes

There aren't so many of these and probably the most common ones are *-like* and *-less*. The general trend here is not to hyphenate unless preceded by a double 'l' or the word has three or more syllables:

SUFFIX	TREND FOR HYPHEN	EXAMPLE
-like	yes and no	seraphim-like childlike
-less	yes and no	shell-less clueless
-odd	always	twenty-odd
-style	always	Szechuan-style

Two words

When two words are put together to make an adjective, they generally take a hyphen:

risk-averse

user-friendly

half-baked

They can also make nouns:

mother-in-law

vice-president

secretary-general

Compound adjectives before a word

The most common place to hyphenate a compound is when it is an adjective preceding a word:

up-to-date accounts

But when a compound adjective follows a word, we take out the hyphens:

the accounts are up to date

When an adverb ending in *-ly* is used before a word, do not hyphenate:

freshly baked bread

But do hyphenate the adverb *well*:

well-baked bread

Numbers and fractions

These are so common that they deserve a section to themselves! When writing out numbers from *twenty-one* to *ninety-nine*, they get a hyphen, as you see here:

twenty-one

twenty-two

ninety-eight

ninety-nine

Similarly with fractions, especially when they are used as adjectives:

three-quarters empty

When they are used as nouns, there's generally no hyphen but you do have the choice:

two-thirds of dog owners

two thirds of dog owners

In conclusion

There is no simple answer to this vexed question. For all the useful-looking 'rules' and 'principles' there are so often exceptions, and the use of words is evolving all the time. (Remember how *email* used to be spelt *e-mail*?) If you write regularly then it is no bad idea to start creating an alphabetical list of compounds, especially if they have alternatives, but for the occasional writer who doesn't want to go that far, reach for Collins online, or simply invest in your friendly proofreader!

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