

Grammar Help Sheet: The Hyphen

The hyphenated words may be either a new coinage made by the writer to fit the occasion or words still in the process of becoming one word. Many words now written as one word were originally separate words and later hyphenated in the transitional stage. For example, post man first became post-man and then postman. More recently basket ball has passed through the transitional basket-ball to basketball.

The use of the hyphen in compounding is in such a stage of flux that authorities often disagree. Because of this disagreement among authorities, the subject of hyphenation is one of the most confused and tantalizing departments of word-study. Since language tends to become simpler as time goes on, there is a tendency toward a more restricted use of the hyphen.

A recent dictionary will assist you in determining the current usage of some words; however, many of our good dictionaries do not agree on the hyphenating of some words. Below are a few words that are hyphenated in the Standard Dictionary and not in the Webster Dictionary:

| <u>Webster</u> | <u>Standard</u> |
|----------------|-----------------|
| living room | living-room |
| house boat | house-boat |
| parcel post | parcel-post |
| textbook | text-book |

The generally accepted rules for hyphenated words are listed below.

Rule 1. The hyphen may be used to join two or more words serving as a single adjective before a noun.

A well-paved road
a know-it-all expression
a bluish-green dress

The hyphen is usually omitted when the first word of the compound is an adverb ending in “ly” or when the words follow the noun.

The road was well paved.
The dress was a bluish green.

Rule 2. The hyphen is used with compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine.

twenty-two
forty-five

Rule 3. The hyphen is used to avoid ambiguity or an awkward union of letters or syllables.

He re-covered the leaky roof.
He recovered his health.
Micro-organism
re-enter
semi-independent
shell-like

Rule 4. The hyphen is used with the prefixes ex, self, all, and the adjective elect.

Ex-governor
self-made
all-American
mayor-elect

Rule 5. The hyphen is placed at the end of the line when it is necessary to divide a word at the end of the line. The division should be made between syllables. Never place a hyphen at the beginning of a new line.

Since no one could watch her that week, Dave and Kathy coordinated their vacation around Erin's schedule.