**Hyphen (-)**

Hyphens are used to link words and parts of words. They are not as [common](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/common) today as they used to be, but there are three main cases where you should use them:

* in compound words
* to join prefixes to other words
* to show word breaks

*Hyphens in compound words*

Hyphens are used in many [compound](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/compound) words to show that the [component](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/component) words have a combined meaning (e.g. *a* [*pick-me-up*](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/pick-me-up)*,* [*mother-in-law*](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mother-in-law)*,* [*good-hearted*](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/good-hearted)) or that there is a relationship between the words that make up the compound: for example, *rock-forming minerals* are [minerals](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mineral) that form rocks. But you don’t need to use them in every type of compound word.

*Compound adjectives*

Compound adjectives are made up of a noun + an adjective, a noun + a [participle](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/grammar-a-z#participle), or an adjective + a [participle](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/grammar-a-z#participle). Many compound adjectives should be hyphenated. Here are some examples:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **noun + adjective** | **noun + participle** | **adjective + participle** |
| accident-prone | computer-aided | good-looking |
| sugar-free | power-driven | quick-thinking |
| carbon-neutral | user-generated | bad-tempered |
| sport-mad | custom-built | fair-haired |
| camera-ready | muddle-headed | open-mouthed |

With compound adjectives formed from the adverb *well* and a participle (e.g. *well-known*), or from a phrase (e.g. *up-to-date*), you should use a hyphen when the compound comes before the noun:

well-known brands of coffee

an up-to-date account

but not when the compound comes after the noun:

His music was also well known in England.

Their figures are up to date.

It’s important to use hyphens in compound adjectives describing ages and lengths of time: leaving them out can make the meaning [ambiguous](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ambiguous). For example, *250-year-old trees*clearly refers to trees that are 250 years old, while *250 year old trees*could [equally](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/equally) refer to 250 trees that are all one year old.

*Compound verbs*

Use a hyphen when a compound formed from two nouns is made into a verb, for example:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **noun** | **verb** |
| an ice skate | to ice-skate |
| a booby trap | to booby-trap |
| a spot check | to spot-check |
| a court martial | to court-martial |

*Phrasal verbs*

You should NOT put a hyphen within [phrasal verbs](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/verbs#phrasal_verbs)- verbs made up of a main verb and an adverb or preposition. For example:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Phrasal verb** | **Example** |
| build up | You should continue to build up your pension. |
| break in | They broke in by forcing a lock on the door. |
| stop off | We stopped off in Hawaii on the way home. |

If a phrasal verb is made into a noun, though, you SHOULD use a hyphen:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Noun** | **Example** |
| build-up | There was a build-up of traffic on the ring road. |
| break-in | The house was unoccupied at the time of the break-in. |
| stop-off | We knew there would be a stop-off in Singapore for refuelling. |

*Compound nouns*

A compound noun is one [consisting](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/consist) of two component nouns. In [principle](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/principle), such nouns can be written in one of three different ways:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **one word** | **two words** | **hyphenated** |
| aircrew | air crew | air-crew |
| playgroup | play group | play-group |
| chatroom | chat room | chat-room |

In the past, these sorts of compounds were usually hyphenated, but the situation is different today. The [tendency](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tendency) is now to write them as either one word or two separate words. However, the most important thing to note is that you should choose one style and stick to it within a piece of writing. Don’t refer to a *playgroup*in one paragraph and a *play-group* in another.

*Hyphens joining prefixes to other words*

Hyphens can be used to join a [prefix](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/prefixes-and-suffixes#prefixes) to another word, especially if the prefix ends in a vowel and the other word also begins with one (e.g. *pre-eminent*or *co-own*). This use is less common than it used to be, though, and one-word forms are becoming more usual (e.g. *prearrange*or *cooperate*).

Use a hyphen to separate a prefix from a name or date, e.g. *post-Aristotelian* or *pre-1900*.

Use a hyphen to avoid confusion with another word: for example, to [distinguish](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/distinguish) *re-cover* (= provide something with a new cover) from *recover* (= get well again).

*Hyphens showing word breaks*

Hyphens can also be used to divide words that are not usually hyphenated.

They show where a word is to be divided at the end of a line of writing. Always try to split the word in a sensible place, so that the first part does not mislead the reader: for example, *hel-met* not *he-lmet*; *dis-abled* not *disa-bled*.

Hyphens are also used to stand for a common second element in all but the last word of a list, e.g.*:*

You may see a yield that is two-, three-, or fourfold.

[You can read more about when to use hyphens on the [Oxford Dictionaries blog](http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2011/10/hyphens-in-the-headlines/). Here you will find helpful tips on when to use hyphens and examples of when they should not be used.]

**Em dash (–)**

An em dash, or **long dash**, is used:

* - in pairs, to mark off information or ideas that are not essential to an understanding of the rest of the sentence:

*Thousands of children—like the girl in this photograph—have been left homeless.*

*My son—where has he gone?—would like to meet you.*

* - to show other kinds of break in a sentence where a comma, semicolon, or colon would be traditionally used:

*One thing’s for sure—he doesn’t want to face the truth.*

*Things have changed a lot in the last year—mainly for the better.*

The em dash is typically used without spaces on either side. Most journals/newspapers, however, set the em dash off with a single space on each side.

Em dashes are especially common in informal writing, such as personal emails or blogs, but it’s best to use them sparingly when you are writing formally.