Compound Adjectives and Hyphenation

**Compound words** are two or more words joined to form a new word. They can be solid (two words written as one without a hyphen, such as *keyboard* or *goldfish*), open (two words written as two words but forming a unit, with no hyphen, such as *post office* or *attorney general*), and hyphenated (two or more words linked with hyphens, such as *well-being*, *self-imposed*, *ex-president*, or *freckle-faced boy*).

**Adjectives** modify (describe) nouns. Example: I am wearing fancy shoes. (What kind of shoes? Fancy. Fancy is the adjective.) Ex.: He wore a faded, blue shirt. (Faded and blue are adjectives.)

**Compound adjectives** are two or more words that *together* modify another word. In most cases, the two or more words are linked together with a hyphen. Hyphenated compound adjectives are used *before* nouns. When they come after nouns, they are not hyphenated, unless they are a hyphenated compound word anyway. Examples:

I have a *part-time* job. but My job at Target is part time.
My six-year-old cat, Phoebe, had kittens. but My cat, Phoebe, is six years old today.
It was a *life-changing* adventure. but The experience was life changing.
It was a *decision-making* process. but The process required decision making.

Otis is a *freckle-faced* boy. and Otis has always been *freckle-faced*.
I like *one-of-a-kind* shoes. and Sparky’s shoes were *one-of-a-kind*.
We filled out a *self-esteem* questionnaire. and The questionnaire measured self-esteem.
The *mother-of-pearl* necklace was a gift. and The necklace was *mother-of-pearl*.

What kind of job? A part-time job. *Part* together with *time* modifies the word *job*. Part-time is the compound adjective that distinguishes what kind of job it is. The difference between an adjective and a compound adjective is that the compound adjective is made of two or more words that *together* modify another word.

Two or more descriptors (*cumulative adjectives*) are separated by commas (She had a big, toothy grin. It was a small, yellow, polka-dotted purse.). In the last example, *polka-dotted* is a compound word as well as a compound adjective. If the adjectives (compound or not) can switch places, a comma is needed to separate them: It was a polka-dotted, small, yellow purse. If the modifying words *can’t* switch places and still make sense, chances are they form a compound adjective. Examples:

Her light-blue hat complemented her salmon-pink, silk scarf. *Silk* and *salmon-pink* both modify the word *scarf*. They can be exchanged: …her silk, salmon-pink scarf. Salmon and pink, however, can not be exchanged, nor can *light* and *blue*: …her silk, pink-salmon…her blue-light hat.)
Miscellaneous

**Use hyphens for words that could be misunderstood**, for example, re-pair (pair again), re-form (form again), co-op (not to be confused with coop), or un-ionized (not to be confused with unionized). In the sentence “She works in the large-print area of the library,” if there were no hyphen, one might think the area of the library was large, rather than the print of the books.

**Compound words composed with prefixes:** Write most words formed with prefixes as one word (*aftereffect*, *extracurricular*, *multiphase*, *socioeconomic*, *interlibrary*, *coauthor*, *intramural*, *bilingual*, *multimedia*, *counterclockwise*, *antisocial*, *overanxious*, to name a few).

Use hyphens when the compound is composed of a **word ending in the same letter the next word begins with** (semi-interested, meta-analysis, anti-intellectual, co-occur, co-op, for example).

**Suspended hyphens:** When two or more compound modifiers have a common base, this base is sometimes omitted in all except the last modifier, but the hyphens are retained (suspended).

Examples: Dotty has an amazing long- and short-term memory. Yoga sessions were 30-, 40-, and 60-minutes.

**When the base word is capitalized,** hyphenate the compound words.
Example: Because I lived for a year with my non-English speaking aunt and my only-Spanish-speaking uncle, my English accent became nonexistent.

Use hyphens **when the compound adjective involves a number.**
Example: The new go-go boots style is from a mid-1970s era.

**Self words:** Use hyphens to connect compound words (adjectives or nouns) using *self* (self-report, self-esteem, self-directed, self-possessed, self-important, self-aware, to name a few).

**Compound adjectives with *ly* words DO NOT NEED TO BE HYPHENATED.**
Adverbs modify verbs. Ex. She ran *quickly*. How did she run (verb)? Quickly (adverb). When adverbs end in *ly* and form a compound adjective, do not hyphenate the compound adjective.

Example: The performance was extremely well attended. Not The performance was extremely-well attended.

Example: They both were happily married women whose husbands were astonishingly accomplished bakers.
Not They were happily-married women whose husbands were astonishingly-accomplished bakers.

No hyphen is required because it is clear that the adverb modifies the adjective (accomplished; how accomplished? Astonishingly accomplished) rather than the subsequent noun (bakers). *Happily* modifies *married*, not *women*. *Happily* and *married* form a unit (compound) adjective.

**Compound adjectives including comparatives and superlatives DO NOT NEED TO BE HYPHENATED.**
Examples: She bakes the most delicious pies; he called at the least desirable moment; a more recent update…; the most ambitious athlete…; a lesser known author…

**NO HYPHEN IS NEEDED with compound words or adjectives that are open** (two words written as one unit with no hyphen) or with when there is no ambiguity. Examples of open compound words: truck stop, uneven bars, full moon, fruit fly, and fishing net. **If a compound adjective is unambiguous,** a hyphen may not be necessary (“…a Sunday morning walk” needs no hyphen between *Sunday* and *morning*). One way to decide if a hyphen is necessary is to see if the phrase might be ambiguous without it (Dr. Hu works at a large animal clinic: large animal or large clinic?). When in doubt, one can check in a dictionary.
EXERCIZES. Correct the following sentences or leave them as is if they are already correct.

1. We need **more qualified** workers. (meaning we need more workers who are qualified).
2. We need **more qualified** workers (meaning we need workers who are more qualified).
3. Gretta is a **well respected** seamstress, according to Mr. Braun, who is himself **well respected** in the sewing world. Her **grade point average** had nothing to do with her sewing skills.
4. The dancers were **repaired** when the dance changed from Tango to Cha-Cha-Cha.
5. Jacob’s dancing shoe needed to be **repaired** after the evening of **long, old time square dances**.
6. Ming’s **fish net** stocking had a hole in it after catching it on her **brass buckled** pumps.
7. The **middle aged** man’s **fish net** was tangled after the **incredibly windy** storm.
8. We arrived at the **football** field at **half time**.
9. This ad says it is a **half-time** position, but I’m not interested in jobs that are **half-time**.
10. I love a **clean, comfortable, freshly made** bed with **tight-fitting** sheets.
11. Jeff bought an **extra large tee shirt** (or **T-shirt**) because the **medium-to-large-sizes** were **all-out**.
12. I learned **a lot** in **high school**, but am glad I am no longer a **high-school** student.
13. It was a **life changing** trip; most **life-changing** was making it to the **mountain-top**.
14. The **most emotionally driven** situations happen at the **least expected** times.
15. • His “**better-late-than-never**” attitude kept him from seeing the humming-bird presentation.
16. A **more recent** article was published about **post-World War II baby boomers** and their **70-to-90-year-old** parents. A **drop-down** menu on the website offers **long- and short- versions** of the article.
17. Tswj was **overanxious** about whether to turn the handle **counterclockwise or clockwise**.
18. To decide if she should be fired, we will have to **look up her slip ups** to see how many she’s had.
19. Ming and Donn wanted a **recreation** of when they first met, which was at the **recreation center**.
20. Darleen’s **self esteem** and sense of **well being** were improved after the lecture for **high risk** students.
21. The **old records** collector was just **18 years old**; already he had **300 old records** in his collection.
22. The **Minnesota-Ohio World-Series** games were more exciting than the **New-York, Florida** games.
Answers

1. We need **more qualified** workers. (meaning we need more workers who are qualified).

2. We need **more-qualified** workers (meaning we need workers who are more qualified).

3. Gretta is a **well-respected** seamstress, according to Mr. Braun, who is himself **well respected** in the sewing world. Her **grade-point average** had nothing to do with her sewing skills.

4. The dancers were **re-paired** when the dance changed from Tango to Cha-Cha-Cha.

5. Jacob’s dancing shoe needed to be **repaired** after the evening of **long, old-time square dances**.

6. Ming’s **fishnet** stocking had a hole in it after catching it on her **brass-buckled** pumps.

7. The **middle-aged** man’s **fishnet** was tangled after the **incredibly windy** storm.

8. We arrived at the **football** field at **halftime**.

9. This ad says it is a **half-time** position, but I’m not interested in jobs that are **half time**.

10. I love a **clean, comfortable, freshly made** bed with **tight-fitting** sheets.

11. Jeff bought an **extra-large tee shirt** (or T-shirt) because the **medium-to-large sizes** were **all out**.

12. I learned a **lot** in **high school**, but am glad I am no longer a **high-school** student.

13. It was a **life-changing** trip; most **life changing** was making it to the **mountain top**.

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22. The **Minnesota-Ohio World Series** games were more exciting than the **New York-Florida** games.

*Several of these situations are somewhat complicated; use a dictionary for assistance when needed.*