



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

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

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 **re paired** 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 **midleaged** man's **fish net** was tangled after the **incredibly windy** storm.
8. We arrived at the **foot-ball** 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.