Compound adjectives

When we use two words together to create a single modifier, we create a compound adjective. The hyphen creates a word group that makes it easier for the reader to read and process its meaning.

Before the noun, use a hyphen
Join compound adjectives with hyphens when you use them before the noun. (Notice that twelve-year-old does not, in this case, use an s):

- She wrote an eight-page essay.
- Sandra is looking for a part-time job.
- The twelve-year-old boy is a skateboard champ.

- We took a fast-moving train to Santa Barbara.
- It was a well-developed research paper.
- He’s taking a much-needed vacation.

After the noun, no hyphen
Do not use a hyphen when the adjective comes after the noun. Notice, in this case, the s on twelve years old:

- Her essay was eight pages long.
- Sandra’s job is part time.
- The skateboard champ is twelve years old.

- The train to Santa Barbara was fast moving.
- Her research paper was well developed.
- His vacation was much needed.

Exceptions to the rule
If the compound contains a proper noun, do not use a hyphen even if it does come before the noun. If the adjective is composed of two nouns, do not use a hyphen. And never use a hyphen with a comparative (-er) or superlative (-est) or to join an –ly adverb to an adjective.

- Containing proper nouns: Have you bought the State Radio concert tickets yet?
- Two nouns: They met at the Friday night dance.
- In comparisons: This is a better looking rosebush.
- ly-adverb + adjective: It’s an easily understood process.

Preventing confusion
Sometimes the hyphen also prevents confusion, as in the following examples:

- Four year-old boys There are four boys. They are each a year old.
- Four-year-old boys There are several boys. They are each four years old.
- Dirty-book burners Several people are burning “dirty” books.
- Dirty book burners Several unwashed people are burning books.
- Greek-language scholar He is a scholar who studies the Greek language.
- Greek language scholar He is Greek himself, and he studies language in general.

Compound adjectives sometimes “lose” their hyphens over time, becoming a single word (eye-catching to eyecatching, for example), so the only way to know for sure is to look the word up in a dictionary.

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