

Compound adjectives

When we use two words together to create a single modifier, we create a compound adjectives that are sometimes, but not always, hyphenated.

Before the noun, use a hyphen

Join compound adjectives with hyphens when you use them before the noun. (Note that *twelve-year-old* does not 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, do not use a hyphen

Do not use a hyphen when the compound 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, and he studies languages.

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

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever

