Success Center
Directed Learning Activity (DLA)

Punctuation 5:
How to Use Hyphens

GO35.1
Directed Learning Activity – How to Use Hyphens

Description: This Directed Learning Activity (DLA) is designed to teach you the basic rules for using a hyphen. Look at the following sentence:

If you learn to use hyphens, you will be able to create never-seen-before words.

This sentence illustrates the power that hyphens can give you to put words together (for example, never-seen-before) and turn them into something that is creative and effective. Hyphens are invaluable for expressing yourself in unique ways and for clarifying elements that could be misread.

Prior Knowledge: It would be helpful to know a couple definitions. A compound word is a combination of two or more words that serves the purpose of a single part of speech (for example, web site, chalkboard, and two-year-old). A prefix is attached to a word at the beginning and usually becomes a part of the word; the combination is often written as one word (for example, preview, retake, and ex-wife).

Step One: Assessing Prior Knowledge

On the lines below, explain what you already know about hyphens. Don’t look ahead or use other sources of information. Try and write something down, but if you don’t know anything about hyphens, then write that you don’t know.

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Step Two: Understanding the Uses of Hyphens

The hyphen ( - ) is a punctuation mark that should not be confused with dashes ( — ), which are longer and have different uses, or with the minus sign ( − ), which is also longer. The hyphen has basically four uses: to divide a word at the end of a line, to create compound words, to separate numbers and fractions, and to separate certain words from their prefixes. Carefully read the explanations and examples below before attempting these techniques yourself in the practice exercises.

1. Use a hyphen to divide a word at the end of a line.

   For the most part, you should try to avoid dividing a word at the end of a line. If you must, here are a few guidelines to follow:

   a. Divide words between syllables. For example:

   un - der - stand     dif - fi - cult     sum - ma - ry
If you don’t know where the syllables are, look up the word in a dictionary.

b. Do not divide a word so that one letter stands alone, such as a-gain or man-y.

c. Do not divide one-syllable words like brought or straight, even if they are long.

2. Use a hyphen between some compound nouns.
   The most common use of a hyphen is between compound nouns. However, knowing when to put a hyphen is easier said than done. Look at the examples below:

   eye  shadow       eye-opener       eyewitness

   As you can see, there are three possible ways of writing compound nouns. They can be written separately (web site, high school, vacation home), hyphenated (all-day event, used-car dealer, three-week vacation, know-it-all attitude, sister-in-law), or as one word (highway, spaceship, boyfriend, racehorse, database).

   There is a wide range of variation in the use of hyphens to join compound words. No rules govern all combinations and the possible combinations are virtually limitless, so many of them will not be found in the dictionary.

   Permanent Compounds
   Some compounds are so common and so frequently used that they have become permanent compounds. These are words like racehorse, boy scout, basketball, railroad, web site, know-it-all, high school, break-in, and database. These combinations can be looked up in a current dictionary to determine whether to separate them, hyphenate them, or write them as one word.

   “Improvised” Compounds
   Some compounds, however, are created on the spot to fulfill a specific need. These combinations will not be found in any dictionary. Here are some examples:

   That is a really off-the-wall suggestion.
   She is having a bad-hair day.
   That fly-by-night detective agency took all my money.
   Those are her can’t-catch-me shoes.

Practice 1: This exercise will take a little creativity. Using the information given in each sentence, create a hyphenated word that describes another word in the sentence.

   Example:  The water she was standing in was knee deep.
   Answer:   She was standing in knee-deep water.

1. That kid has such a loud mouth and annoys everyone.

2. My lawn was rain soaked and was hard to mow.
3. This class that I am teaching is driving me completely crazy.

4. The technology at Cerritos College is all up to date.

5. My brother has a baby face and he likes wrestling.

6. Steven is in the crowd that blames America.

7. I like his mustache. It looks like salt and pepper.

Guidelines for Using Hyphens in Compound Words

Your best source for checking whether hyphenation is necessary will be a dictionary. If the word you want is not there, Google the word and see what you find. You can check reputable sources online to see how the word is written.

There are, however, some guidelines that will help you decide whether to hyphenate without using a dictionary.

a. Compound Words Before Nouns

Use a hyphen to connect two or more words functioning together as an adjective before a noun.

I like fast-acting medication when I have a headache.
They were in a long-term relationship.
He’s a friendly-looking man.
She got a much-needed haircut.
This is a low-budget job.

It’s important to understand this concept. Use a hyphen if two words must be written together in order to make sense. Look at the sentence below:

The boy threw a rock at a second-story window.
You can’t separate second-story and use each word to describe the window. You can’t say second window or story window. The two words must go together to give one meaning.

b. Compound Words After Nouns

If the hyphenated adjective comes after the noun it is describing, don’t use a hyphen.

I took some fast-acting medicine. but … I took some medication that was fast acting.

He’s a friendly-looking man. but … I think the man is friendly looking.

She got a much-needed haircut. but … Her haircut was much needed.

c. Hyphens to Clarify

Sometimes it is important to use a hyphen between two words because the words can have different meanings depending on whether you use a hyphen or not. For example:

A hot-water bottle is a bottle for holding hot water, but a hot water bottle is a water bottle that happens to be hot.

A roll of 20 dollar bills and a roll of 20-dollar bills are two very different amounts of money.

At the garage sale, did you buy twenty odd books, or twenty-odd books?

Practice 2: Each sentence below needs one or more hyphens added to it.

1. Tonight, the chef is following a time tested recipe.

2. He is a well known chef for many Hollywood parties.

3. The waiter’s off color remarks did not amuse anyone at the table.

4. This recipe is a secret that has been well kept; only a handful of in the know chefs have ever seen it.

5. Jim waved at his soon to be ex-girlfriend.

6. His essay was filled with made up words.

3. Use a hyphen to separate numbers and fractions.

a. Hyphenate compound numbers from twenty-one through ninety-nine.

The teacher had thirty-two children in her classroom.

Only twenty-one of the children were bilingual.
b. Use a hyphen when a number is joined to a unit of measurement and the two together describe a noun.

- 100-yard dash
- ten-day tour
- two-minute speech
- 40-hour work week

c. Use a hyphen with other types of number phrases that are used to describe a noun.

- nine-year-old girl
- six-year old
- five-dollar bill
- eighteenth-century philosopher

d. Use a hyphen for all spelled-out fractions.

- You need one-third of a cup of sugar for that recipe.
- More than one-half of the students voted to remove soda machines from campus.

Practice 3: Add hyphens where needed.

1. Roland’s dad is thirty seven years old.

2. The book Martian Chronicles has twenty two chapters.

3. The chef cooks twenty four course meals every week.

4. The chef adds two thirds of a cup of flour and one half teaspoon of vanilla.

5. It is said that possession is nine tenths of the law.

6. The teacher assigned a 10 page paper for us to write.

4. Use a hyphen for certain prefixes.

Most prefixes are attached to the front of a word with no space or hyphen. For example:

- copayment
- hyperactive
- transcontinental
- semiautomatic
- reapply
- uninhibited

Exceptions

Sometimes, we use hyphens after prefixes to avoid doubling a vowel or tripling a consonant, and sometimes to prevent misreading or mispronunciation.
To avoid doubling a vowel:

anti-immigration
de-emphasize
coop

To avoid tripling a consonant:

bell-like shape

To prevent an initial misreading or mispronunciation:

re-cover vs. recover [I will re-cover the sofa when I recover from the flu.]
re-lay vs. relay [Relay the message. They will re-lay the tiles.]
re-lease vs. release [Will you re-lease the apartment? Will they release the hostages?]

If you put a prefix in front of a word that is capitalized, use a hyphen to avoid having a capital letter in the middle of a word.

anti-American trans-European pseudo-British
un-Christian trans-Atlantic

Use a hyphen when the prefix is all, ex or self.

all-around self-image ex-wife
all-American self-examination ex-boyfriend
all-encompassing self-starter ex-boss
all-powerful self-appointed ex-president

When great is used as a prefix with a kinship term, it is hyphenated. When grand is used, it is sometimes hyphenated, and sometimes not.

great-aunt grandfather
great-uncle grandmother
great-grandmother grand-uncle
great-grandfather grand-niece

Practice 4: Add hyphens where needed.

1. After dinner we visited my great-grandmother.

2. Denny would like to go to eHarmony and find a girlfriend, but his parents are very anti Internet dating.
3. Mary said her exhusband’s father would always be a part of the family.

4. Heather’s mom thinks she lacks selfconfidence.

5. Kevin was an allstate running back during his senior year in high school.

6. His behavior was completely unAmerican.

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**Step Three: Editing for Hyphen Errors**

Now that you have learned the rules, it’s time to apply that knowledge to writing. When you write an essay, you must always edit for mistakes. That means critically looking at your grammar and punctuation and correcting any mistakes you have made. The practice exercises in Step Three are meant to help you learn how to edit hyphen errors.

Look at the following sentences. Determine if hyphens are being used correctly in each sentence. If it is, write OK. If the sentence is wrong, correct it by adding or deleting hyphens.

1. His pre World War II views changed drastically after he fought in the war.

2. You need to repress your jeans.

3. Lying on the floor beside the plant he had knocked over and chewed on, the cat looked extremely self-satisfied.

4. The rock hard cake is impossible to eat.

5. Three quarters of his working hours are spent teaching mathematics; one quarter is spent writing textbooks for elementary schools.

6. That’s a half baked idea if I ever heard one!

7. Those books are really out of date.

8. Mike ran the 50 yard dash in under ten seconds.

9. The event is so famous that three ex-presidents are attending the banquet.

10. One hundred fifty five people filed into the courthouse to view the arraignments.

11. I am in school, so I want to work only part time.

12. We saw a beautiful blue-green bird this morning.

13. Martin is on antiinflammatory medication.
14. We live in a post-September 11th era.

15. The Civil War took place in the nineteenth century.

16. Mom will turn forty six next month.

17. Look at Mr. Wilson’s lawn. It is so well kept.

18. All the boys fall in love with Marissa’s doll like face.

19. Mrs. Douglas gave Toshiko a seashell and some newspaper wrapped fish to take home.

20. Bicycling in the city is my favorite form of re-creation.

21. The Moche were a pre-Columbian people who developed a sophisticated culture in ancient Peru.

22. Your dog is well known in our neighborhood.

23. Gold is the twenty ninth element in the periodic table.

24. The swiftly moving tugboat pulled alongside the barge and directed it away from the rocks.

25. We knew we were driving too fast when our tires skidded on the rain slick surface.

26. Olivia had hoped to find a pay as you go plan to finance the building of her vacation home.

27. The Black Death reduced the population of some medieval villages by two-thirds.

28. My great grandfather helped to build the transSiberian railroad.

29. That painting is a fifth-century creation.

30. Ron’s exgirlfriend called him last night and wanted to get back together.

**For Further Practice:**

If you want to read more notes and practice using hyphens, go to:

Tutor Feedback:

______ The student can define compound word (a combination of two or more words that serves the purpose of a single part of speech) and prefix (a letter, or a group of letters, attached to a word at the beginning that partially indicates its meaning) and can explain the four basic uses of hyphens.

______ In Step Two, the student correctly inserted hyphens into the sentences in Practice 1, Practice 2, Practice 3, and Practice 4.

______ In Step Three, the student identified which sentences used hyphens correctly and which ones did not. The student then was able to correct those sentences by adding or deleting hyphens.

Additional Comments: ____________________________________________________________
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PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME ___________________ DATE ________________

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE ________________________

STUDENT – DO NOT FORGET TO TURN THIS SHEET IN AT THE FRONT DESK!

You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.