

Editorial Graphics and Publishing Services

When to Hyphenate Words

Questions on hyphenation are among the most commonly received by the Editorial Help Desk. As with most compound words (that is, two words used together to describe or define something or someone), hyphenated words usually evolve from two separate words to a hyphenated word, to one word.

For example: The adjective *on line* evolved to *on-line* and is now *online*.

MCPS follows the hyphenation usage in the 11th edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

Hyphenating two words: Two words used together to describe a noun are often hyphenated to prevent misreading.

For example: Consider the phrase "a new student dorm." Is this a new building? If so, no hyphen is needed for the sentence to read correctly. So, the phrase would read "a new student dorm."

If this is a dorm for new students, a hyphen is needed for the sentence to read correctly. So the phrase would read "a new-student dorm."

Fractions: Always hyphenate fractions when used as adjectives or when they stand alone

For example: Two-thirds
One and three-quarters
He has a one-third interest in the company.
It weighs one-fourth as much as wood.

Multiple hyphens: Multiple hyphens are sometimes appropriate for some phrases.

For example: Over-the-counter drugs, non-school-based forms, non-high-school students, 10-year-old students.

Omission of part of a hyphenated word: This is often done when there are two words with the same expression or where the second part of the two-part word is the same.

For example: Both first- and second-year teachers attended the conference.

This applies to both solid (closed) and open compounds. A solid compound is a word that is made up of two words that are used as one (for example, online, underfed, prepaid).

Example of omission with a solid compound: Both over- and underfed babies are treated at the health center.

An open compound is made up of two words that are used together but remain separate (for example, off line, income tax, hard drive, civil rights)

Example of omission with an open compound: You can work either off- or online at this office.

Note: Always leave a space after the first hyphen.

Hyphenating with a proper noun: A hyphen should appear before a proper noun (capitalized word) like April.

For example: The budget will not be approved until mid-April.

Note: Too many hyphens can be confusing. If there is almost no chance that a compound word can be misread in a sentence, then no hyphens are necessary.