

Writing and Humanities Tutoring Center



Hyphens

Hyphens are not the same as dashes and change how a phrase makes meaning and is understood. We use many hyphenated phrases in speech and writing all the time. The struggle of many writers is recognizing when a phrase in speech is actually hyphenated in writing.

Hyphens Change Meanings

For example, “**well done**” is normally a congratulatory statement indicating approval or a compliment. In contrast, “**well-done**” refers to the degree with which a piece of meat has been cooked. What we can clearly see here is that the same words can have drastically different meanings when written as separate words or as a hyphenated phrase.

Ways to Recognize Hyphenated Phrases

How can we tell the difference in meaning between a hyphenated and a non-hyphenated word? Usually, unless you have already encountered the word before, you can't tell what the difference in meaning is. But there are a few ways to become more familiar with the difference:

1. Pay attention to hyphenated phrases and look them up in a dictionary or information source.
2. Look for context clues in the sentence itself.
3. Try using the words in separate sentences to see if it helps you pin down their meaning.
4. Build your vocabulary of hyphenated phrases so you are better able to recognize the difference next time you encounter them.
5. When in doubt, double-check.

Important Differences Among Hyphenated Words

While some phrases can be both hyphenated and unhyphenated with different meanings, others only make sense as a hyphenated phrase such as “deep-fried, absent-minded, long-haired, self-worth, editor-in-chief, merry-go-round.” It's important to remember to use hyphens with these phrases as many lose all meaning when left unhyphenated.

Here's a list of most things that need to be hyphenated:

Compound adjectives + noun — load-bearing pillar, rock-hard bread, one-of-a-kind gem, state-of-the-art kitchen, newly-built library, cage-free chicken, little-known artist, beautiful-looking flowers, chocolate-dipped strawberries, fast-acting medicine, deep-cleaning solution, fancy-looking box, grass-fed beef, student-centered education, wind-powered energy, self-sealing lid, self-cleaning oven, spill-proof lunchbox

*adjectives coming after the noun don't need to be hyphenated (This lid is spill proof. This kitchen is state of the art.)

Age + noun — five-year-old child, forty-year-old man, sixty-four-year-old suspect, five-decade-long investigation, two-year experiment

*just as with the previous category, descriptions coming after the noun don't need to be hyphenated (This child is five years old. The suspect is a male who is sixty-four years old.)

Spelling out numbers 21 - 99 — twenty-one, twenty-two, ninety-nine, ninety-eight

*the numbers between 0 - 20 are NEVER hyphenated. Numbers after 99 are only hyphenated when including a number between 21 - 99 like "one hundred and ninety-nine"

Certain prefixes — all-encompassing, self-starting, anti-clockwise, pre-holiday season, over-representation, self-effacing comment

For clarity — oval-shaped, ice-cold, de-freezer, shell-like, pearl-colored

Differences Between Hyphens and Dashes		
Hyphens (-)	En Dash (–)	Em Dash (—)
Connects compound words and phrases	Shows a range of dates, times, numbers, or objects in a set	Separates thoughts and ideas in a sentence, creates interruptions in dialogue
well-done half-baked fast-acting pet-friendly twenty-one ninety-nine full-timer merry-go-round	A–Z 1–10 January–December 9 A.M.–5 P.M. 5000 B.C.E–2022 C.E. 1900–50	There were three little pigs—Gunther, Gustav, and Hans. "You can't be serio—" "Oh, I'm very serious."