

## Correct use of Compound Words

Words that are made up of more than one word are called compound words. Some words, such as rowboat or heartbeat are written as one word, while others, like floppy disk or cross fire are written as separate words. Still others, such as up-to-date or eye-opener, are joined with a hyphen.

How do you determine if words should be joined with a hyphen?

If two or more words are used to form a compound adjective,<sup>1</sup> then they are usually joined with a hyphen. Often you will use adjectives made up of word combinations that are not listed in a dictionary. The guiding principle then is to hyphenate most compound adjectives that precede a noun but not those that follow a noun.<sup>2</sup>

For example: The carpenter used a six-foot plank to repair the deck.

The compound adjective *six-foot* describes one plank that is six feet long. *Six-foot* is a compound adjective preceding a noun (plank).

If we said: The carpenter repaired the deck with a plank that was six feet long.

The words *six feet* would not be hyphenated.

Most words with prefixes or suffixes are written without hyphens: antiwar, eyewitness.

Some exceptions are:

With capitalized base words: pro-Clinton, anti-Bush, non-Catholic.

With figures: pre-1989, post-1945.

With prefixes such as all, e, ex, self: all-inclusive, e-commerce, ex-husband, self-contained.

Words that end with ly don't use a hyphen: poorly planned, highly polished.

Chemical compounds don't use a hyphen either: sodium chloride, dihydrogen monoxide.

Use a hyphen for clarity or to avoid confusion: anti-intellectual, re-cover. Antiintellectual would be confusing and recover means something entirely different than re-cover. Recover would mean to get something back. Re-cover means to cover something again.

Use a hyphen with compound numbers and fractions: one-eighth, fifty-two, one-half, thirty-five.

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<sup>1</sup> Adjectives are modifiers that describe, limit, or restrict other words. For more information see the Write Place handout on "Identifying Adverbs and Adjectives."

<sup>2</sup> Lunsford, Andrea, and Robert Connors. The New St. Martin's Handbook. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's. 2001.