



## HYPHENS

This article does not so much concern errors committed in English but merely proposes some practical rules for the use of the **hyphen**.

Among the many devices we use in writing, there is one that poses particular problems. It is the **hyphen**. The Americans seem to shun it, preferring to run their words together and the British are uncertain when to use it. There exist many a treaties on the subject and certain rules do exist but here are a few suggestions based entirely on practical, professional experience in writing English.

It should be placed:

➤ in compound adjectives

(a) *top-level, last-seen, often-criticised, much-appreciated*, and famously “*long-standing*”.

If we omit the **hyphens**, we risk changing the meaning as in:

- The top level landing (the uppermost landing that is not inclined)

- The long standing member (the member who is tall and not seated)

(b) *internationally-accepted, technically-irreproachable, maternally-loving*.

Not that the sense would here change in the absence of the **hyphen** but it makes for easier reading to present the two words as a single concept on first sight.

(c) *easy-to-open* (jar), *certain-to-fail* (idea), *impossible-to-answer* (question). Obviously the **hyphens** would be omitted if the noun preceded the compound adjective (This jar is easy to open.)

For an absolutely fascinating, highly detailed (though slightly academic) study of this phenomenon, consult <http://web.tiscali.it/njross/dubarrelart.htm>.

➤ in certain compound nouns: *living-room, after-shave, TV-table*

This, however, is a very debatable point as, in many cases, even in British English, the **hyphen** has been dropped as in: *bedroom, tabletop, watershed, turntable*.

Either way, the two elements must in some way be connected (for, if one takes the words literally, a “living room” is a room that is animated and lively as opposed to one that is lacklustre and dull). There is usually a slow progression from two words, through hyphenated words to a single word.

➤ in adjectives formed from multiple nouns (note that when used as nouns, no **hyphen** is needed; the first example below might appear in an article entitled “The hotel kitchen”):

a *hotel-kitchen* employee, a *newspaper-journalist’s* pen-name, a *UN-document reference-number*

➤ then there are those words that can flip either way, thus changing the meaning

a fast train ride (is that a fast ride in a train / fast *train-ride* or a ride in a fast train / *fast-train* ride?)

a simple man’s overall (a simple overall for a man / simple *man’s-overall* or an overall for a simple man / *simple-man’s* overall?)

a white lady’s dress (is it the dress or the lady that is white?)

And this can be taken to ridiculous, but necessary extremes as in an “*open-ended, UN-approved, resolution-based, environmentally-oriented, bilingual, Anglo-French document*”. Remove any of those **hyphens** and it will take you much longer to sort out the already obscure enough meaning.

And then, it should be placed after all those prefixes which are not words in their own right, e.g. semi-, non-, anti-, pro-, anglo-, turbo-, etc.

Finally, there is the “M-dash”. This is a very useful parenthetical device to use within a sentence already partitioned into many subsidiary clauses by commas, e.g. “He was, however, well-known in diplomatic circles – albeit in New York – for his forthright manner.” In a short sentence such as this the advantage is not that obvious but in a long and maybe rambling sentence it can be a lifesaver. However, various publications do print this dash as a **hyphen** (i.e. without spaces, thus “..circles–albeit in NY–for ...”). This is aesthetically unpleasing as it links two words in the fashion of a hyphen (circles–albeit) rather than separating two clauses. The M-dash should always be set off by two blank spaces.