

## Compound adjectives

When we use two words together to create a single modifier, we create a compound adjective. The hyphen creates a word group that makes it easier for the reader to read and process its meaning.

### Before the noun, use a hyphen

Join compound adjectives with hyphens when you use them before the noun. (Notice that *twelve-year-old* does not, in this case, use an *s*):

*She wrote an **eight-page** essay.*

*Sandra is looking for a **part-time** job.*

*The **twelve-year-old** boy is a skateboard champ.*

*We took a **fast-moving** train to Santa Barbara.*

*It was a **well-developed** research paper.*

*He's taking a **much-needed** vacation.*

### After the noun, no hyphen

Do not use a hyphen when the adjective comes after the noun. Notice, in this case, the *s* on *twelve years old*:

*Her essay was **eight pages** long.*

*Sandra's job is **part time**.*

*The skateboard champ is **twelve years** old.*

*The train to Santa Barbara was **fast moving**.*

*Her research paper was **well developed**.*

*His vacation was **much needed**.*

### Exceptions to the rule

If the compound *contains a proper noun*, do not use a hyphen even if it does come before the noun. If the adjective is *composed of two nouns*, do not use a hyphen. And never use a hyphen with a *comparative (-er)* or *superlative (-est)* or *to join an -ly adverb to an adjective*.

Containing proper nouns:

*Have you bought the **State Radio concert** tickets yet?*

Two nouns:

*They met at the **Friday night** dance.*

In comparisons

*This is a **better looking** rosebush.*

ly-adverb + adjective:

*It's an **easily understood** process.*

### Preventing confusion

Sometimes the hyphen also prevents confusion, as in the following examples:

***Four year-old** boys*

There are four boys. They are each a year old.

***Four-year-old** boys*

There are several boys. They are each four years old.

***Dirty-book** burners*

Several people are burning "dirty" books.

*Dirty book burners*

Several unwashed people are burning books.

***Greek-language** scholar*

He is a scholar who studies the Greek language.

*Greek language scholar*

He is Greek himself, and he studies language in general.

Compound adjectives sometimes "lose" their hyphens over time, becoming a single word (*eye-catching* to *eyecatching*, for example), so the only way to know for sure is to look the word up in a dictionary.

*Contributed by Rosemary McKeever*

