

Grammar Corner by Pat McNees

To Hyphenate or Not-to-Hyphenate?

To figure out if a book has been professionally edited (and not just proofed for spelling by Cousin Agnes, the English major), I look inside to see if Acknowledgments and Foreword are spelled correctly. Then I check a few pages for commas and hyphens. Badly done, they signal sloppy self-publication. Are you hyphen savvy?



Insert or delete hyphens, as appropriate, in the following sentences:

1. The self publishing expert was a highly-motivated promoter with a little used brain.
2. The vice-president and president-elect were looking for a shell-like, antiinflationary product.
3. Her up to date meeting notes came out from 1973-81.
4. He's a four-year-old boy. She's a four year old. Their friend is four years old.
5. It was a tongue-in-cheek expression. I repeat: It was tongue in cheek.
6. She recovered the sofa the kids had stained; then she recovered the car the wild animal trainer had stolen.
7. John had a two-thirds interest and got two thirds of the revenues. Henry got only a one-third share.

ANSWERS:

Correct answers (rules in parentheses)

1. The **self-publishing** expert was a **highly motivated** promoter with a **little-used** brain.
 - a. **self-publishing** (Compounds created by adding a prefix are normally written as one word, unhyphenated, with several exceptions. Always use hyphens to connect the prefixes *all*, *ex*, *quasi*, and *self* in compound words.)
 - b. **highly motivated** (Avoid hyphens after -ly words. The reader will expect the -ly word to modify the word that follows it. [Don't use the hyphen even between an -ly adverb + adjective combination in front of a noun or pronoun.]
 - c. "**little-used brain**" if seldom used; "little used brain" if the used brain was small. (Use hyphens where they prevent confusion.)
2. The **vice president** and **president-elect** were looking for a **shell-like, anti-inflationary** product.
 - a. **vice president** and **president-elect** (Don't hyphenate vice president; do hyphenate president-elect.)
 - b. **shell-like, anti-inflationary product** (Insert hyphens to avoid doubled vowels or triple

consonants that cause confusion or are awkward to read. "Cooperate," "coordinate," and "reestablish" are no longer considered awkward, but a hyphen is needed to distinguish a food "co-op" from a chicken "coop.")

3. Her **up-to-date meeting notes** came out from **1973 to [or through] 1981**.

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- a. Her **up-to-date meeting notes** (but it would be “her meeting notes were up to date”). (Use hyphens where two or more consecutive words make sense only when understood together as a single idea modifying a *noun that follows*, making a compound adjective. Do not hyphenate them when they come *after* the noun.)
 - b. **from 1973 to [or through] 1981** or **between 1973 and 1981** (Don’t use the hyphen that indicates a range of dates to substitute for words. You could say: “Her meeting notes (1973–81) were up to date.” Also note that an en dash (–) instead of a hyphen (-) is preferred with a date range.)
4. He’s a **four-year-old** boy. She’s a **four-year-old**. Their friend is **four years old**.
- a. She’s a **four-year-old** [the noun is assumed]. The rest is correct. (Hyphenate ages only if they are used as adjectives *before* the word they modify.)
5. It was a **tongue-in-cheek** expression. I repeat: It was **tongue in cheek**.
- a. No errors. Same principle as 3a. (Do not hyphenate most compound modifiers if they occur *after the noun being modified*, even if hyphenating them before the noun.)
6. She **re-covered** the sofa the kids had stained; then she **recovered** the car the **wild-animal trainer** had stolen.
- a. She **re-covered** the sofa [covered it again] but **recovered** the car [got it back]. (Use hyphens

where they prevent confusion. In particular, use a hyphen with “re-” only when “re-” means again and omitting the hyphen creates a confusing word. Thus, “He re-signed the contract before resigning from office,” “She re-created the scene.”)

- b. **wild-animal trainer** (if he trained wild animals) or “wild animal trainer” (if the trainer himself was wild) (Use hyphens to avoid ambiguity.)
7. John had a **two-thirds** interest and got **two thirds** of the revenues. Henry got only a **one-third share**.
- a. No errors. (Hyphenate fractions as adjectives, if they are spelled out. Do not hyphenate them as nouns.)

For more on proper hyphenation, check out:

- University of Minnesota: www1.umn.edu/urelate/style/hyphens.html
- *The Chicago Manual of Style* sections 7.82–7.90
- *The Chicago Manual of Style* online Q&A: www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/CMS_FAQ/HyphensEnDashesEmDashes/HyphensEnDashesEmDashes_questions01.html

Pat McNees (www.patmcnees.com) was a book editor (Harper & Row and Fawcett) before becoming an independent journalist, writer, and editor (www.writersandeditors.com). You’ll find more links to helpful explanations of grammar here: www.writersandeditors.com/work4.htm.

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