

Hyphens



Use a hyphen to differentiate certain words (*re-formed*, *re-mark*, etc.) whenever omitting the hyphen would change the intended meaning of the sentence.

- He *recollected* [remembered] his own toys while the little girl *re-collected* [picked up] her toys.
- He *recovered* [got back] the stolen merchandise.
She *re-covered* the stolen merchandise [with a blanket to hide it from the cops].
- The newspaper *correspondent* [reporter] attended a divorce case, in which a *correspondent* [pen pal] of the *corespondent* [codefendant] admitted to having been a *co-respondent* [collaborator] with the plaintiff in a jointly written complaint letter to the reporter's editor.
- In an effort to *repress* rebellion in the sweat shop, the boss would force agitators to *re-press* the jeans.

The hyphen might be optional (up to the preferences of the writer or editor) if it would produce a double letter, although established words (like *unnatural*) must be nonhyphenated despite the double letters.

- Eating *reenergized* [or *re-energized*] me.
- The *coordinates* [or *co-ordinates*] on the map were *nonnumerical* [or *non-numerical*].

Some words (such as *tractor-trailer* and *seventy-five*) have a hyphen as part of their spelling, so each is treated grammatically as a single compound noun. Some fields of study (*plasma-physics*, *solid-mechanics*, etc.) or job titles (such as *letter-carrier* or *flight-attendant*) might fall into this category, but usually at the discretion of the writer or journal editor. When they first appear in English, compound nouns tend to be separated with a space (e.g., *light year*), but they are often later hyphenated (*light-year*) and ultimately melded (*lightyear*). Whenever the author chooses to write a compound noun with a space, a hyphen is usually still required when the same pair of words is used as an adjective, as explained below.

Use a hyphen if a pair of words *acts together* to modify another word. EXCEPTION: omit the hyphen when the first word in the pair is an adverb ending in *ly*. In relatively rare cases, the first word might end in *ly*, yet still be an adjective.¹ In that case, use a hyphen if the first word in the pair is intended to modify the immediately adjacent word, thereby forming a compound adjective to modify something else later in the sentence.

- For *large-deformation*² problems in *solid mechanics*,³ the finite-*element*⁴ method might produce an inverted *finite element*,⁵ which prompts some researchers to tout *mesh-free* methods as superior, *easily implemented*⁶ alternatives. Even with these *so-called* particle methods, *large deformation*⁷ can still cause a *nonlinear*⁸ *solid-mechanics*⁹ constitutive model to give *comically nonsensical* results.
- The *friendly-looking*¹⁰ man spoke to the *pimplly teenage* girl standing under the *brightly lit* portrait of her *steely-eyed* (but *actually quite sweet*) grandfather.

¹ Examples of non-adverb words ending in “ly” include: bodily burly chilly comely costly courtly dastardly deadly deathly disorderly early frilly friendly ghastly goodly gravelly grisly heavenly hilly holy homely jolly kindly knurly leisurely likely lively lonely lovely lowly mannerly mealy measly melancholy oily only orderly otherworldly pearly pebbly pimply scaly shapely sickly silly slatternly slovenly sly spindly sprightly squiggly stately steely surly treacly ugly ungainly unlikely wily woolly worldly.

² Removing “-deformation” would make the topic unintentionally about “large problems,” but *large* is intended to modify *deformation*, not *problems*. Thus, the hyphen is needed to form a compound adjective, linking *large* with *deformation*.

³ The writer has chosen NOT to treat *solid-mechanics* as a single compound noun naming a specific field of study. The hyphen is omitted because *solid mechanics* isn't acting as a compound adjective to modify anything. If in doubt about whether or not to hyphenate the name of a field of study, leave the hyphen out, and let the publisher decide. It must, however, be hyphenated when it is used as a compound adjective, as in “*solid-mechanics equations often subsume simpler equations used in fluid mechanics.*”

⁴ The hyphen is required because “finite-element” acts as a pair to modify “method.”

⁵ The hyphen is omitted because the words are not acting as a pair to modify something else.

⁶ A hyphen is omitted because *easily* is acting as an adverb modifying *implemented*, so it isn't an adjective modifying *alternative*. The comma preceding “easily implemented” is acting as a coordinating conjunction to form a coordinated adjective list with *superior*. A comma is allowed if it could be naturally replaced with the word “and” without sounding odd or changing intended meaning.

⁷ A hyphen is omitted because “large deformation” is not acting together to modify anything.

⁸ Not *non-linear*! Also, this list is not a “coordinated” adjective list, so it should not be separated with commas. Never separate adjectives (whether compound or not) with commas unless you could, in principle, replace those commas with conjunctions. In this case, for example, you wouldn't say “the nonlinear AND solid-mechanics model.”

⁹ A hyphen is required because the pair of words (*solid-mechanics*) is acting together to modify “model.”

¹⁰ Here, “friendly-looking” is a compound adjective, making the hyphen necessary even though the first word ends in “ly.” Without the hyphen, this phrase might be referring to a man who is simultaneously friendly and looking for something, or it might refer to a man who is looking in a friendly manner. Either way, that's not the intended meaning!