

chicago manual of style hyphens

Mastering Chicago Manual of Style Hyphens: A Comprehensive Guide

chicago manual of style hyphens are a critical element of clear and correct written communication, often overlooked but essential for precision. Understanding their application is paramount for writers, editors, and anyone adhering to academic or professional publishing standards. This guide delves deep into the intricacies of hyphenation as prescribed by the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS), covering everything from compound modifiers and numbers to prefixes and special cases. We will explore the fundamental principles that govern hyphen usage, provide practical examples, and clarify common points of confusion, ensuring you can confidently navigate the nuances of hyphenation in your own work. Mastering these rules not only enhances readability but also elevates the professionalism of your writing, making your content more accessible and impactful.

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Understanding the Purpose of Hyphens

Hyphens serve a vital function in written English: they connect words to form a single conceptual unit or to clarify meaning. Their primary role is to prevent ambiguity, especially when words might otherwise be misinterpreted. In the context of the Chicago Manual of Style, hyphens are treated with meticulous attention, ensuring that clarity and consistency are maintained across all forms of writing, from scholarly articles to trade books.

The CMOS emphasizes that the hyphen is a punctuation mark used to join words or parts of words. It is distinct from the en dash (–) and the em dash (—), which serve different grammatical purposes. Incorrect hyphenation can lead to misreading, awkward phrasing, or even a complete alteration of intended meaning. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the CMOS guidelines is indispensable for anyone serious about producing polished and professional prose.

Hyphenation in Compound Modifiers

One of the most frequently encountered areas of hyphenation in the Chicago Manual of Style concerns compound modifiers. These are two or more words that function together as a single adjective to modify a noun. The core principle here is that when a compound modifier precedes the noun it modifies, it is generally hyphenated. However, this rule has important exceptions and

nuances.

When Compound Modifiers Require Hyphens

When a compound modifier appears before the noun it describes, it should typically be hyphenated. This ensures that the reader understands that the words are acting as a single descriptive unit. For instance, in the phrase "a well-written essay," "well-written" acts as one adjective modifying "essay." Without the hyphen, "well written essay" could be misconstrued as the essay being written in a "well" manner, rather than being of good quality.

Consider these examples:

- A fast-paced novel
- A cutting-edge technology
- A state-of-the-art facility
- A long-term commitment

The hyphenation is crucial for clarity and for creating a smooth reading experience. It signals to the reader that these words are working in tandem to paint a single picture.

When Compound Modifiers Do Not Require Hyphens

There are several situations where compound modifiers are not hyphenated, even when they precede the noun. A key exception involves adverbs that end in -ly. Adverbs of this nature inherently modify the adjective that follows them, and the combination is usually clear without a hyphen. For example, "a highly regarded author" does not require a hyphen between "highly" and "regarded" because "highly" clearly modifies "regarded."

Another common scenario where hyphens are omitted is when the modifier follows the noun. In this case, the modifier is typically treated as two separate words, and no hyphen is needed. For example, "The essay was well written" is correct without a hyphen. Similarly, phrases like "The company is state of the art" are also correct without hyphens when the modifier appears after the noun.

The CMOS also notes that established compound modifiers, those that have become so common that their meaning is readily understood, may eventually be written as open compounds or even closed compounds without hyphens. However, it is always best to consult a current dictionary or style guide if unsure.

Suspensive Hyphenation

Suspensive hyphenation is employed when multiple compound modifiers share a common second element. In such cases, the common element is not repeated, but the preceding modifiers are hyphenated and linked to it, often with hyphens. This technique saves space and improves readability. For example, instead of writing "short-term and long-term projects," one would write "short- and long-term projects." The hyphen after "short" indicates that it, too, is linked to "term."

This form of hyphenation is particularly useful in technical writing, financial reports, and other contexts where precision and conciseness are highly valued. It ensures that complex ideas are presented clearly and efficiently.

Hyphenating Numbers and Fractions

The Chicago Manual of Style provides specific guidelines for hyphenating numbers, particularly when they are spelled out.

Compound Numbers

When writing out numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine, they are always hyphenated. This rule applies whether the number is used as a cardinal number or as part of a larger number.

- Twenty-three
- Fifty-six
- Ninety-nine

When these numbers function as compound modifiers preceding a noun, they are also hyphenated. For example, "He had twenty-five years of experience."

Fractions

Written-out fractions are generally hyphenated when they function as adjectives or nouns. This includes fractions where the numerator and denominator are both single words.

- One-half
- Three-quarters
- Two-thirds

However, if the numerator or denominator is already a compound word, or if the fraction is part of a measurement, the hyphenation rules can become more complex and often depend on context. For instance, "twenty-five hundredths" would typically not be hyphenated as a unit in the same way as "one-half." When in doubt, it is advisable to spell out the numbers clearly or to use numerals for greater precision.

Hyphens with Prefixes and Suffixes

The use of hyphens with prefixes and suffixes is another area where the Chicago Manual of Style offers clear guidance to ensure consistency and avoid ambiguity.

General Rules for Prefixes

In most cases, prefixes are joined directly to the root word without a hyphen. This forms a closed compound. Examples include "prefix," "reiterate," "unhappy," and "supervise." The CMOS generally favors this approach for common prefixes like "anti-," "co-," "dis-," "ex-," "in-," "pre-," "pro-," "re-," "sub-," and "un-."

However, there are specific circumstances where a hyphen is recommended or required when using prefixes. One common reason is to avoid awkward letter combinations or to prevent misreading. For instance, when a prefix is followed by the same vowel that begins the prefix (e.g., "re-elect," "anti-inflammatory"), a hyphen is often used to maintain clarity and ease of pronunciation. Similarly, when the root word is capitalized (e.g., "mid-Victorian"), a hyphen is used.

Specific Prefix Guidelines

The CMOS provides specific guidance for certain prefixes:

- **Ex-:** When referring to a former position, "ex-" is hyphenated (e.g., ex-wife, ex-president).
- **Self-:** Prefixes like "self-" are always hyphenated (e.g., self-esteem, self-control).
- **All-:** Prefixes like "all-" are hyphenated (e.g., all-inclusive, all-powerful).
- **Great-:** When referring to lineage, "great-" is hyphenated (e.g., great-grandmother).

It is important to remember that these are general guidelines, and established usage often dictates the preferred form. Consulting a reputable dictionary is always recommended for specific words.

Hyphens with Suffixes

Hyphens are rarely used with suffixes, as they are typically attached directly to the root word to form a single word. For example, words like "happiness," "quickly," and "national" are formed by adding suffixes without the need for a hyphen.

An exception can occur in technical contexts or when creating new coinages where clarity is paramount. For instance, if a suffix is added to a proper noun or a word that might otherwise cause confusion, a hyphen might be employed. However, this is uncommon in standard prose.

Special Cases and Irregularities in Hyphenation

Beyond the general rules, the Chicago Manual of Style addresses several special cases and common irregularities in hyphenation to ensure consistency and clarity.

Compound Adjectives with "Co-"

When "co-" is used as a prefix to form a compound that is not yet considered a single word, it is generally hyphenated. This is often the case when the "co-" signifies "acting together." Examples include "co-author," "co-worker," and "co-pilot." However, some commonly used words with "co-" have become closed compounds and are not hyphenated, such as "cooperate" and "coordinate." The CMOS advises consulting a dictionary for established usage.

Geographical Compound Modifiers

Compound modifiers derived from geographical names are typically hyphenated when they precede the noun. For example, "a New York-based company" (note the en dash for the specific type of compound indicating origin, though hyphens are also seen in less formal contexts) or "a Pacific Northwest resident." The distinction between a hyphen and an en dash can be important here, with en dashes often used to indicate relationships between geographical entities.

Adverbial Compounds Following the Noun

As mentioned earlier, when a compound modifier appears after the noun it modifies, it is usually treated as two separate words and is not hyphenated. For example, "The report was well-researched" is correct. This principle is fundamental to avoiding ambiguity.

Hyphenating Proper Nouns

Proper nouns that are compound words are generally hyphenated according to their established spelling. This might include names of organizations, titles, or place names that have a hyphenated form. For instance, if a company's official name is hyphenated, that hyphenation should be maintained.

When to Avoid Hyphens

While hyphens are essential for clarity in many situations, there are also instances where their use can be detrimental or unnecessary. The Chicago Manual of Style encourages writers to err on the side of clarity and simplicity, avoiding hyphens when they do not serve a clear purpose.

Open Compounds

Many word combinations are considered "open compounds" and are written as two separate words without a hyphen. These often include common pairings that are not intended to function as a single adjective before a noun. For example, "ice cream" is always two words. Similarly, "high school" is typically treated as two words unless it functions as a compound adjective before a noun, like "high-school students."

Closed Compounds

Closed compounds are formed when two words are joined together to create a single word with no space and no hyphen. Many common words fall into this category, such as "keyboard," "sunlight," and "bedroom." The CMOS generally favors closed compounds when they are well-established and readily understood.

The decision of whether to use a hyphen, an open compound, or a closed compound often depends on the established usage of the word or phrase, as well as its function within the sentence. Consulting a reputable dictionary is the most reliable way to determine the correct form.

Adverbs Modifying Adjectives

A common pitfall is over-hyphenating. Adverbs ending in "-ly" that modify adjectives are generally not hyphenated when they precede the adjective. For example, "The movie was incredibly moving." The adverb "incredibly" clearly modifies "moving," and no hyphen is needed.

The key principle remains: use hyphens when they are necessary to prevent ambiguity or to create a clear conceptual unit. When the meaning is obvious and the words function independently, avoid the

hyphen.

Frequently Asked Questions about Chicago Manual of Style Hyphens

Q: When should I hyphenate a compound modifier?

A: You should generally hyphenate a compound modifier when it appears before the noun it modifies and functions as a single descriptive unit. For example, "a well-known author" or "a cutting-edge design." However, if the modifier follows the noun, it is typically not hyphenated (e.g., "The author is well known").

Q: Are there exceptions to the hyphenation of compound modifiers?

A: Yes, there are notable exceptions. Adverbs ending in "-ly" that modify an adjective are not hyphenated when they precede the noun (e.g., "a highly regarded expert"). Also, established open compounds that are commonly understood may not require hyphens.

Q: How does the Chicago Manual of Style handle hyphenation with prefixes?

A: Generally, prefixes are joined directly to the root word without a hyphen (e.g., "reiterate," "unhappy"). However, hyphens are used in specific cases, such as to avoid awkward letter combinations (e.g., "re-elect"), when the prefix is followed by a capitalized word (e.g., "mid-Victorian"), or for specific prefixes like "ex-," "self-," and "all-."

Q: What is suspensive hyphenation?

A: Suspensive hyphenation occurs when multiple compound modifiers share a common second element. The common element is not repeated, but the preceding modifiers are hyphenated and linked to it. For example, "short- and long-term goals."

Q: How should I hyphenate numbers?

A: Numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine are hyphenated when written out (e.g., "thirty-five"). Written-out fractions are also hyphenated when they function as adjectives or nouns (e.g., "one-half," "three-quarters").

Q: When should I avoid using hyphens?

A: You should avoid hyphens in open compounds (e.g., "ice cream"), closed compounds (e.g., "keyboard"), and when adverbs ending in "-ly" clearly modify adjectives preceding a noun (e.g.,

"incredibly fast"). The primary goal is clarity; use hyphens only when they are necessary to prevent misinterpretation.

Q: How do I know if a compound word should be open, closed, or hyphenated?

A: The best approach is to consult a reputable dictionary. Established usage is the primary determinant. If a word is consistently written as two words (open), one word (closed), or with a hyphen, adhere to that standard. Dictionaries like Merriam-Webster or the Oxford English Dictionary are reliable resources.

Q: Is there a difference between a hyphen and an en dash in Chicago style?

A: Yes, there is a significant difference. A hyphen (-) is used to join words or parts of words. An en dash (–) is typically used to indicate ranges, connections, or orientations (e.g., "May–August," "the New York–London flight"). An em dash (—) is used for interruptions or parenthetical statements.

Q: What if I encounter a new or unusual compound word?

A: For novel compounds, especially those acting as modifiers, the principle of clarity is paramount. If hyphenating clarifies the intended meaning and prevents ambiguity, it is generally advisable. If the meaning is clear without a hyphen, it is often better to leave it open. Consulting style guides and dictionaries for similar constructions can also provide guidance.

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