Biotext

Compound adjectives in complex content – when to hyphenate

Compound adjectives – where an adjective is made from 2 or more words put together – are common in complex and technical information. This guide provides some general advice for when to include a hyphen in compound adjectives of various types. The most important 'rule' is to be consistent.

Type	Rule	Examples	Exceptions
adjective + adjective	Hyphenate whether before or after the noun	red-hot surface the surface is red-hot	none
noun + noun	Hyphenate before the noun	student-nurse accommodation	Set phrases used as adjectives, unless a hyphen is needed to prevent ambiguity: tax office ruling retrospective tax-office ruling
adjective + noun	Hyphenate before but not after the noun	long-term plans we made plans for the long term	Set phrases used as adjectives: equal opportunity employer high school teacher sea surface temperature
noun + adjective	Hyphenate whether before or after the noun	energy-efficient house the house is energy-efficient disease-free fruit the fruit are disease-free	none
adjective + participle	Hyphenate before but not after the noun	open-ended question the question was open ended	none
adjectival or adverbial phrase	Hyphenate before the noun; usually leave open after the noun	an over-the-counter drug sold over the counter	none

Type	Rule	Examples	Exceptions
noun + participle	Hyphenate before but not after the noun	a government-owned facility the facility is government owned	Some well-established compounds (set as a single word): lifesaving widespread
adverb ending in ly + participle or adjective	Leave open whether before or after the noun	a mildly amusing person he is mildly amusing	none
adverb not ending in ly + participle or adjective	Hyphenate before but not after the noun	a well-fed animal the animal was well fed fast-moving traffic the traffic was fast moving	When the adverb rather than the compound as a whole is modified by another adverb (entire expression is open): a very much needed addition
noun + gerund	Hyphenate adjective form before the noun; usually leave noun form open	involved in decision making decision-making body	Some well-established compounds (set as a single word): caregiving copyediting
foreign phrases used adjectivally	Leave open unless hyphens are used in the original language	an a priori argument in vitro fertilisation	none
ordinal number + superlative	Hyphenate before but not after the noun	the third-largest city the city is the third largest in Australia	none
chemical terms	Leave open in both noun and adjective forms	sodium chloride a sodium chloride solution	none
age terms	Hyphenate in both noun and adjective forms	a 3-year-old a 5-year-old child but she was 5 years old	none
compounds with capital letters, quotation marks or other changes in typography	Leave open	a High Court ruling a ‘make or break’ decision a type A executive type 2 diabetes	none