

Plain English Campaign: Using hyphens

Copyright Plain English Campaign

Using hyphens

This is only a basic guide. If you have any suggestions, corrections or improvements, please contact us. You can contact us at:

PO Box 3
New Mills
High Peak
SK22 4QP.

Phone: 01663 744409
Fax: 01663 747038
Email: info@plainenglish.co.uk
Website: www.plainenglish.co.uk

Copyright

Plain English Campaign owns the copyright to this guide. You can save one copy of the guide to disk, and print one copy out for your personal use. You must not make more than one copy without our permission.

Using hyphens

The main use of a hyphen is to join two or more words together.

Sometimes a word needs a hyphen for it to be spelt correctly.

For example:

- one-off
- part-time
- face-to-face

In some situations there are no hard and fast rules and the use of hyphens is a matter of personal preference. However, there are some guidelines on when you should use them.

In compound adjectives (single adjectives formed from two or more words) that appear before a noun

For example:

- An up-to-date guide is a guide that is up to date.
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance is a benefit that is based on your income.
- An energy-efficient fridge is one that is energy efficient.

These hyphens are often necessary to avoid confusion.

For example:

- A blue-collared shirt is a shirt with a blue collar, while a blue collared shirt could be a blue shirt that has a collar.
- A French-dictionary salesman is a man who sells French dictionaries, while a French dictionary salesman could be a Frenchman who sells dictionaries.
- A red-wine bottle is a bottle for red wine, while a red wine bottle could be a wine bottle that is red.

To distinguish one word from a similar one

For example:

- re-sort, not resort
- co-op, not coop
- re-form, not reform

With prefixes

Some words formed with a prefix are always hyphenated.

For example:

- self-employed
- pro-family
- anti-aircraft

With some prefixes, a hyphen is not necessary but is preferable to help with pronunciation, avoid a double vowel, or stop a word looking odd.

For example:

- co-ordinate
- re-enter
- de-ice

When numbers between 21 and 99 are written out in full

For example:

- twenty-one
- ninety-nine
- one hundred and thirty-four (Note that only 'thirty-four' is hyphenated.)

© PEC 2009