

**High Intermediate 1**  
**Unit 6: Punctuation Note**  
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## **Hyphenation**

hyphenation = the use of hyphens

A hyphen (-) is a punctuation mark used to join words or parts of words. It's commonly used in compound words (like "mother-in-law"), to split a word at the end of a line, or to link words in a phrase to clarify meaning (like "well-known author").

### **The Difference between a Hyphen and a Dash:**

A hyphen (-) and a dash (–) are both horizontal lines, but they serve different purposes and have distinct lengths. A dash is slightly longer than a hyphen, roughly the width of the letter “N”. A dash is used to indicate a range of values (e.g., “pages 10–20”), to show a connection between two things (e.g., “New York–London flight”), or to replace the word “to” in ranges (e.g., “1990–2000”).

### **The Use of Hyphens**

#### **Hyphenation Inside Compound Nouns**

We sometimes hyphenate compound nouns. A compound noun is a noun which is made up of several parts.

Examples:

*father-in-law*  
*X-ray*  
*merry-go-round*  
*mother-in-law*  
*editor-in-chief*  
*self-esteem*  
*six-pack*  
*right-of-way*  
*dry-cleaning*  
*warm-up*

**Point:**

Don't think that all compound nouns are hyphenated. The following examples are all compound nouns, but we don't hyphenate them. We use a space between the two parts or we join them:

*swimming pool*

*washing machine*

*diving board*

*ice cream*

*high school*

*living room*

*coffee mug*

*dishwasher*

*notebook*

The decision to hyphenate, combine, or separate compound nouns often depends on several factors, including:

**1. Usage and Convention**

- **Historical Usage:** Over time, some compound nouns have evolved from being hyphenated to being written as one word or two words. For example, “to-day” has become “today.”
- **Common Usage:** Words that are frequently used together may eventually be written as one word (e.g., “notebook”).

**2. Clarity and Readability**

- **Avoiding Ambiguity:** Hyphens can help clarify meaning and avoid confusion. For example, “small-business owner” is clearer than “small business owner,” which could imply a business owner who is small.
- **Ease of Reading:** Sometimes, hyphenation makes a compound noun easier to read and understand, especially when it combines multiple words (e.g., “mother-in-law”).

**3. Grammar and Style Guides**

- **Style Guides:** Different style guides (like APA, MLA, or Chicago Manual of Style) have specific rules for hyphenation. Writers often follow these guidelines to maintain consistency.

- **Grammar Rules:** Certain grammatical rules dictate hyphenation, especially in attributive compounds (e.g., “well-known author” vs. “the author is well known”).

#### 4. Part of Speech

- **Noun vs. Adjective:** Compound nouns are often written as one word or two words, while compound adjectives are more likely to be hyphenated (e.g., “high school” vs. “high-school student”).

#### 5. Regional Variations

- **British vs. American English:** There can be differences in hyphenation between British and American English. For example, “e-mail” (British) vs. “email” (American).

#### Examples

- **Hyphenated:** mother-in-law, well-being, editor-in-chief
- **One-word:** toothpaste, notebook, sunflower
- **Two-word:** ice cream, high school, living room

Understanding these factors can help you decide when to hyphenate compound nouns.

### **Hyphenation Inside Compound Adjective Modifiers**

We hyphenate compound adjective modifiers.

Examples:

*a fifteen-year-old teenager*

*a ten-story building*

*a well-known dentist*

*a ten-dollar bill*

*a high-school student*

#### **Why should we hyphenate compound adjective modifiers?**

Hyphenation sometimes helps us avoid confusion and ambiguity.

Examples:

*three-hundred-year-old trees* = trees which are 300 years old

*three hundred-year-old trees* = 3 trees which are 100 years old

*three hundred year-old trees* = 300 trees which are 1 year old

*American football-player* = a footballer from the United States of America  
*American-football player* = an athlete who plays American football

**Source:**

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