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

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1 Examples of non-adverb words ending in “ly” include: bodily burly chilly comely costly courtly dastardly deathly disorderly early frilly friendly ghastly goodly gravelly grizzly handsomely heavenly hilly holy homely jolly kindly knurly leisurely likely lively lovely lowly manly measly melancholy oily only orderly otherworldly pearly pebbly pimply scalpy sickly silly slatternly sloe spindly sprightly squiggly stately steely surly tautly treacly treaclly treacly treacly ungodly unquietly 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 subsense 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.

7 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.

8 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!