

Using Hyphens

Punctuation gives the written word the cadence and inflection that pauses and tone changes do when we speak. One of the most troublesome areas of punctuation involves when and where to hyphenate words because the connection with spoken sentences is not immediately clear. The key is to use hyphenation to improve readability. **Apply the general rules below to improve your written communication.**

1. **Hyphenate unit modifiers.** When at least two words appear before another word they describe, and both words work together as a “unit,” that multiple-word unit is referred to as a “unit modifier.” Hyphenating a unit modifier indicates that removing one of the words would alter the meaning.

For example, “activity-based accounting” could not be replaced with either “activity accounting” or “based accounting.” Hyphenate constructions, such as:

- Long-term strategic objectives
- Old-growth forests

However, don’t hyphenate the same words when used after the term they modify; compare the phrases above with these sentences:

- Our strategic objectives are long term.
- We want to examine the effects on forests characterized by old growth.

2. **Hyphenate to avoid confusion.** Rephrasing is often the best solution for sentences with numerous hyphens. Sometimes hyphens can help you avoid misunderstanding, especially when the word order in a sentence seems ambiguous.

For example:

- Heavy oil field equipment (The reader wonders which is heavy: the oil or equipment?)
- Heavy-oil field equipment (The hyphen clearly tells the reader that this refers to field equipment for heavy-oil operation.)

- Heavy oil-field equipment (The hyphen clearly tells the reader that this refers to heavy equipment for use in an oil field.)
3. **Use hyphens to avoid running three consonants together or doubling of a letter** (especially a vowel) in prefixes as well as tripling of a letter in suffixes.

For example:

- Instead of “gasstream,” use “gas-stream.”
- Instead of “deenergize,” try “de-energize.”

4. **Hyphenate “suspensive constructions.”** Suspensive constructions occur when you want to describe two situations pertaining to the same word and separate them by an “and” or an “or.”

For example:

- In order to win the game, you must construct at least two, three- and four-syllable words.
- The students hearing will be tested for both high- and low-pitch tones.

5. **Do not use hyphens in “unit modifiers” where the first word ends in -ly or in those made up of two adverbs** (words that define verbs).

For example:

- Recently diagnosed condition
- Typically aggressive approach
- Very closely monitored area