
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Vocabulary

Hyphenation



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This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute Vocabulary. I'm Neil.

Catherine

And I'm Catherine. And today we're talking about hyphenation.

Neil

Hyphens are those little signs – like dashes – that we use in writing to join two words together.

Catherine

Yes, like in **old-fashioned**. There's always a hyphen between **old** and **fashioned**. Let's start with a clip from Brian. He's a news reporter, and he's reporting from a high school about an election.

Neil

Think about this question while you're listening: How does Brian describe the young people at the school? Here's Brian.

INSERT

Brian

I asked some **eighteen-year-old** students at **this secondary school** how they're voting in this year's election. They're all **hard-working** young people. **Twenty-two** of them are undecided and are likely to make a **last-minute** decision. But a sizable group say today's politicians are not **well respected** and their attitudes are **out of date**. Back to the studio.

Neil

So we asked you: How does Brian describe the young people at the school?

Catherine

And the answer is: He says they are **hard-working**.

Neil

That means they work hard. Now there are lots of compound adjectives like **hard-working** that we make with an adjective or adverb like **hard** plus a present participle like **working**.

Catherine

And we always write them with a hyphen. So **hard hyphen working** (hard-working).

Neil

And we can make compound adjectives in other ways too. Listen to this clip for three more examples.

INSERT

Brian

I asked some **eighteen-year-old** students at this **secondary school** how they're voting in this year's election. **Twenty-two** of them are undecided and are likely to make a **last-minute** decision.

Catherine

First we had **eighteen-year-old students**. **Eighteen-year-old** is an adjective made from three words joined together with hyphens. When we write age before a noun, we use hyphens.

Neil

Eighteen hyphen year hyphen old (eighteen-year-old).

Catherine

Exactly. And it's the same with numbers; for example, we write the phrase **a two-door car** like this:

Neil

A two hyphen door car (a two-door car). But that's only for numbers **before** the noun. If you write: **the students are eighteen years old**, you don't need hyphens.

Catherine

Now, the second compound in that clip was **twenty-two**.

Neil

And the rule is: always use hyphens in numbers from **twenty-one** to **ninety-nine**.

Catherine

Twenty hyphen one (twenty-one). Two hundred and **ninety hyphen nine** (two hundred and ninety-nine).

Neil

Good. Now the last compound adjective we had there was **last-minute**. The students were going to make a **last-minute** decision.

Catherine

And that's the adjective **last** plus the noun **minute**, joined with a hyphen. Now for another clip. Listen out for some more compound adjectives.

INSERT

Brian

A sizable group say today's politicians are not **well respected** and their attitudes are **out of date**.

Catherine

Well respected. That's an adverb, **well**, and the past participle of a verb, **respected**. And together, they make an adjective, and the two parts of the adjective need a hyphen when we write them before a noun.

Neil

So it's a **well-respected politician**, with a hyphen: **well hyphen respected politician** (well-respected politician).

Catherine

Yes. But in a phrase like **the politicians were well respected** we don't use a hyphen, because the adjective comes after the noun, not before. And that rule is the same for three-word compound adjectives like **out-of-date**.

Neil

So, the phrase **out-of-date attitudes** has hyphens because the adjective is before the noun, but the phrase **their attitudes are out of date** doesn't have hyphens.

Catherine

Exactly. And one last rule is that we never use hyphens in compound adjectives that have an adverb which ends in **-ly**.

Neil

No, we don't. So in phrases like **a carefully written letter** we don't use hyphens.

Catherine

Now let's talk about **compound nouns**. In our clip, Brian was reporting from a secondary school. The phrase **secondary school** is a compound noun - and there's no hyphen in it.

Neil

No, there isn't. Most compound nouns are written as two separate words

Catherine

If you're not sure, check in a good dictionary.

IDENT

6 Minute Vocabulary from the BBC.

Catherine

And it's time for a quiz! Number one: What's the compound adjective in this sentence and does it need a hyphen? **We were late because of the slow-moving traffic.**

Neil

Slow-moving is the compound adjective, and it needs a hyphen.

Catherine

Very good! And number two. Is there a hyphen in **a forty-mile run**?

Neil

Yes, there is. **Forty hyphen mile run** (forty-mile run).

Catherine

Number three: **The teacher was very well liked.** Is there a hyphen in **well liked**?

Neil

We don't need a hyphen there.

Catherine

Well done if you got those right. And before we go, here's a vocabulary tip. When you are reading, make a note of compound adjectives and nouns with - and without - hyphens. Keep a list and check it regularly.

Neil

Yes. There's more about this at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Vocabulary.

Both

Bye!

Vocabulary points to take away:

There are a lot of ways to make compound adjectives. Most compound adjectives have hyphens, but some do not.

Compound adjectives with hyphens in them include:

adjective/adverb + present participle:

a hard-working student, a good-looking man

ages and numbers when used before a noun:

eighteen-year-old students, a two-door car

compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine:

fifty-two, seventy-eight

compound adjectives formed in other ways, for example

adjective/adverb + noun

a last-minute decision, a one-way street, full-time staff

or noun + adjective:

a world-famous athlete

adverb/noun + the past participle of a verb when used before a noun:

well-respected politicians, a battery-operated toy

three-word compound adjectives when used before a noun:

an out-of-date hairstyle, an out-of-work father

Compound adjectives **without** hyphens in them include:

adverb/noun + the past participle of a verb when used after a noun:

the politicians were well respected, the toy was battery operated

three-word compound adjectives when used after a noun:

that hairstyle is out of date, his father is out of work.

compound adjectives made with an adverb ending in -ly, both before and after a noun:

a carefully written letter, the letter was carefully written.

Compound nouns do not usually have a hyphen:

secondary school, swimming pool, ice cream

But a few do:

t-shirt, mother-in-law