



The Writing Center @ JSCC

Hyphens

The hyphen, an often-misused piece of punctuation in English grammar, is used in two primary ways, with fractions and with cooperating adjectives. This handout also outlines the major ways that these rules are misapplied. As always, if you have any questions, please call us at the Center at 425.8848.

Fractions used as adjectives

When a spelled-out fraction comes just before a noun, use a hyphen between the numbers.

- Properly used: The recipe calls for **three-fourths teaspoons** of salt.
- Incorrectly used: The recipe calls for **three fourths teaspoons** of salt.
(Since “three fourths” appears immediately before the noun teaspoons, we should hyphenate it.)

Do not hyphenate fractions used as nouns/pronouns.

When a spelled-out fraction comes before a prepositional phrase (and is therefore used as a noun/pronoun), do NOT use a hyphen between the numbers.

- Properly used: The recipe calls for **three fourths** of a teaspoon of salt.
 - Incorrectly used: The recipe calls for **three-fourths** of a teaspoon of salt.
(Since “three-fourths” appears immediately before the prepositional phrase of a teaspoon, we should NOT hyphenate it.)
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Link two cooperating adjectives

Use a hyphen to join two adjectives that are working together to collectively describe one noun or noun phrase. If you could write the word *and* between the adjectives and mean the same thing, do not use a hyphen.

- Properly used: He burnt his hand on a **red-hot** piece of metal.
- Incorrectly used: He burnt his hand on a **red hot** piece of metal.
(We don't mean that the metal was both red and hot or that a red piece of metal was hot. The “red” tells us how hot the metal was, so a hyphen should connect the adjectives as one.)

Do not hyphenate adverbs to adjectives that they are describing.

- Properly used: He burnt his hand on an **extremely hot** piece of metal.
- Incorrectly used: He burnt his hand on an **extremely-hot** piece of metal.
(“Extremely” describes “hot,” so we should omit the hyphen.)

Do not hyphenate two adjectives working separately.

- Properly used: The students brought their teacher a **big, yellow** cake.
- Incorrectly used: The students brought their teacher a **big-yellow** cake.
(The cake was not so yellow that it was big (as in the above examples in which the metal was so hot it was red); the adjectives work separately to describe two qualities of the cake.)