



Uni-edit English Writing Tip: How to use hyphens correctly (Part A)

Level of difficulty: Advanced

Editors at Uni-edit often need to correct the use of hyphens during English editing of manuscripts. Correct use of hyphens shows the author's advanced command of English and helps to make detailed descriptions clear.

The hyphen, which is a very short horizontal line that looks like this '-', is very helpful to disambiguate modified words, which will make your writing clearer. Hyphens are used often in all academic writing in English.

Hyphens cause writers more trouble than any other form of punctuation, except perhaps commas. This may be because the hyphen has no analogue in speech; it is punctuation created purely by the needs of print. The point of the hyphen is to avoid ambiguity for the reader.

Let's look at some common uses and misuses:

Create a compound word using a hyphen

Correct: the well-known actor

Incorrect: the well known actor

In this example, 'well-known' is a compound word that modifies 'actor'. The hyphen indicates that the 'well' applies to only the 'known' and does not apply to the 'actor'. That is, it is the actor is not both well and known.

Correct: the out-of-date curriculum

Correct: short-term solution

Make the modification clear using a hyphen

Correct: He is a small-businessman.

Incorrect: He is a small businessman.

Above, to indicate that it is the business that is small, and not the man who is small, we need the

hyphen. Below is another example, where both situations are correct but have different meanings.

Correct: A light-green suitcase is pale in color.

Here the suitcase's color is described.

Correct: A light green suitcase is not heavy.

Here the suitcase is both light in weight and is green.

END OF TIP

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