

A Quick Primer on Hyphens

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Have you ever noticed how observation is such an important part of learning?

People get way too upset about hyphens (or commas, pick your poison). Think of punctuation as a road sign. Punctuation tells you how to interpret the open road, the curves, and the hills of language. Some punctuation tells you when to stop—a period equals a full stop (guess that's why the British call it that). A colon, dash, or semicolon equals a rolling stop or proceed with caution, not quite a stop. A comma is a pause (I think I see something in the road ahead, oh yeah, it's just a mailbox beside the road).

Hyphens aren't quite like other punctuation marks. They're more of a device to show relationships between words, rather than traffic signals.

I've always encouraged students who have a particular problem (regardless of what it is) to make a point of *observing* instances that they can be fairly certain demonstrate correct use. It's helpful to keep a notebook. Sometimes, just the act of writing something down (or typing it) will help you to remember it. When you make your observations about hyphens, don't just look at the hyphenated term; notice its position in the sentence. What follows it? Is the word that follows a noun? If not, is there a noun close by, perhaps after several more adjectives? If no noun follows and it's hyphenated anyway, maybe it's one of those permanent hyphen compounds discussed below. Look it up in a dictionary and see.

The following discussion covers the most common uses of hyphens. As with other points of style, popular references vary in their recommendations. I generally use a variety of style references and try to go with the consensus. My references are noted at the end of this article.

Adjectives

Permanent Compounds

There are some hyphenated adjective compounds that are always hyphenated regardless of their position in the sentence and will appear that way in your dictionary. These are terms like *#-year-old*, *on-site*, *long-term*, *state-of-the-art*. The *AMA Manual of Style* puts *up-to-date* in the category of permanent compounds, but some English dictionaries no longer do.

If you suspect a compound needs a hyphen, think about whether the words in the compound are always or almost always used together. If the answer is yes, look it up. If you can find it in the dictionary hyphenated, you should hyphenate it whether it precedes the noun or follows the verb. These, by the way, are called permanent compounds. Keep a notebook. As you encounter these compounds, add them to your list. Create an abbreviation expander for them, so that you don't have to think about them or look them up over and over.

Temporary Compounds

The next use of the hyphen with compound adjectives is what we call a temporary compound. When you look at adjectives preceding a noun, try to determine whether they form a single idea in the way they modify the noun.

For example, in a 3-inch scar. You don't have a 3 scar and an inch scar, you have a 3-inch scar. The two words join together to make a single adjective. (Note: The new *Book of Style for Medical Transcription* drops the hyphens in metric constructions in accordance with recommendations from the *Système Internationale* [S.I.] committee.)

Let's look at something else. *The patient was admitted with a 3-day growth of beard, disheveled, and with a foul body odor.* Does 3 modify *growth* by itself? Does *day*? No, it takes both words combined to make sense out of *3-day growth*. Similarly, another patient has a *7-month pregnancy*.

Words and abbreviations indicating ratios are hyphenated: *BUN-creatinine ratio*, *I-to-E ratio*, *A-G ratio*. Note: Abbreviations, but *not* words, indicating ratios can also be rendered with a virgule or slash, e.g., *A/G ratio*.

Compounds consisting of words that are of equal weight are hyphenated: *obsessive-compulsive*, *physician-patient relationship*, *mother-daughter bond*.

Compound Adjectives Containing Participles

A third type of adjective compound is the adjective or noun plus participle (usually the *-ed* but sometimes the *-ing* form of a verb). These compounds are hyphenated when they precede a noun but not when they follow it. Included in this category are words like *well-developed*, *well-nourished*, *over-worked*, *over-wrought* (*wrought* is a participle even though it doesn't look like one), *under-paid*, *fast-paced*, and so on.

Compounds Containing Prefixes

Hyphenate a compound modifier consisting of a prefix followed by a capitalized word, an abbreviation, a number, or a letter. Examples include *non-Hodgkin lymphoma*; *non-A, non-B hepatitis*; *anti-RNA*; *non-AIDS-related infection*.

Use a hyphen after a prefix if the prefix applies to a following phrase rather than a single word. Similarly, use a hyphen after a word that modifies a phrase. Examples include *non-small-cell* lung cancer and *non-insulin-dependent* diabetes mellitus. In a phrase such as *non-small-cell carcinoma*, if your word processor allows it, you may use an *en* dash for the first hyphen and a regular hyphen for the second. Similarly, when a word modifies an entire phrase, an *en* dash may be used instead of a hyphen.

References are inconsistent when hyphenating phrases such as in the examples above. One well-respected medical dictionary has *non-small cell lung cancer* in one location, but *small-cell lung cancer* in another and *small cell lung cancer* in yet another. The rules above, however, are widely accepted; moreover, you should be consistent in typing a phrase the same way each time. Again, pick a style and put it in your abbreviation expander so that you don't have to think about it.

Two Tests for "Compoundness"

When you have two adjectives preceding a noun, see if you can take one out and still have the phrase including the noun make sense. Another trick is to put *and* between the adjectives and still have the phrase make sense. If either of these tricks works, do not hyphenate.

Noun Compounds

The trend to drop the hyphen in compounds is reflected most dramatically in noun compounds. Typically, compound nouns may be nouns or other parts of speech that are put together to mean something new. They often start off as two words, sometimes go through a hyphenated phase, and many end up as one word. *Headache*, *toothache*, *stomachache*, *houseboat*, *farmhouse*, *oversight*, *bookkeeping*, *southeast*, *grandfather*, and *pocketbook* are examples. There are no rules that I know of that will tell you when to close a noun compound.

Noun compounds containing a preposition (*in*, *on*, or *to*) are, like adjective compounds containing prepositions, generally hyphenated, for example, *mother-in-law*. Compounds with prepositions in the middle may be permanent or temporary compounds, so it's always a good idea to look these up. Exceptions include *followup*, *workup*, *checkup*, *flareup*, *onlooker*, *passerby*.

Stepbrother and *stepmother* are closed but *half sister* is open and *great-grandmother* is hyphenated. *Chief of staff* and *physician assistant* are open. As with adjectives, nouns of equal weight are hyphenated when used as a single unit, as in *fracture-dislocation*.

Proper nouns denoting race, residence, or origin are usually not hyphenated: *New Yorker*, *African American*, *Irish Catholic*, *French Canadian*. Coined or colloquial forms of such terms, however, may be closed or hyphenated (*Aframerican*; *Afro-American*). Consult a dictionary to be certain of use.

Multiple-word terms used for the names of methods, chemicals, diseases, compounds, and functions are not hyphenated nor are commas used to separate these words (*sickle cell disease*, *basal cell nevus syndrome*, *sodium chloride excretion*, *congestive heart failure*, *atrial septal defect*, *right upper quadrant*, *left lower extremity*, *right upper lobe*). Solitary eponyms used with syndromes, diseases, methods, procedures, tests, and the like are not hyphenated (*Fisher exact test*).

Self- compounds (*self-evident*), whether *self* precedes or follows the noun, are hyphenated (with a few exceptions, e.g., *selfless*, *myself*, *himself*), as are *all-* compounds (*all-inclusive*, *all-out*), and *ex-* compounds (*ex-husband*). Compounds using *half* may be open, closed, or hyphenated (*half-life*, *half-hearted*, *half sister*, *halfback*). Spelled-out fractions are hyphenated when used as adjectives (*two-thirds*, *one-fourth*, *three-fifths*, but *thirty-one hundredths*) but open when used as nouns. Colors in which the first word modifies the second are left open (*blue gray*, *reddish orange*, *coal black*).

When Not to Use Hyphens

Most prefixes are joined to roots without the use of a hyphen. These prefixes include *ante-*, *anti-*, *bi-*, *co-*, *contra-*, *counter-*, *de-*, *extra-*, *infra-*, *inter-*, *intra-*, *micro-*, *mid-*, *non-*, *over-*, *pre-*, *post-*, *pro-*, *pseudo-*, *re-*, *semi-*, *sub-*, *super-*, *supra-*, *trans-*, *tri-*, *ultra-*, *un-*, and *under-*. This rule is most frequently abused with the prefixes *non-* and *un-* for some reason. Don't fall prey to this mistake. Hyphens may be used to avoid misreading or mispronouncing and if the prefix is followed by a proper noun, an abbreviation, or a phrase.

The following suffixes are not preceded by a hyphen unless it would create an awkward combination of repetitive letters: *-fold*, *-hood*, *-less*, *-like*, *-wise*.

The above discussion does not cover every use of the hyphen, of course, but if you focus on these uses of the hyphen, you'll get most of your hyphen uses correct.

One Final Tip

You can use a PubMed search to determine whether a compound is closed, open, or hyphenated. See Georgia Green's article in this issue, "The Best Things in Life Are Free: How to Use Medical Journal Abstracts."

Quick Reference

Here is a list of compound words that occur frequently in medical dictation. Although some references may show other forms of the following words, these are widely used and accepted. The plural form is indicated by means of parentheses.

afterload (adj.)
amino acid level(s) (noun)
bachelor's degree (noun)
basal cell carcinoma (noun)
bed rest (noun)
birth control method(s) (noun)
blood-brain barrier (noun)
bone marrow biopsy (noun)
brother(s)-in-law (noun)
breast-feeding (noun or adj.)
check up (verb)
checkup(s) (noun)
chickenpox (noun)
cogwheel (adj.)
dipstick (noun or adj.)
downgoing (adj.)
eardrum (noun)
end-expiratory pressure (noun)
eye drops (noun)
father figure (noun)
fiberoptic (adj.)
fingerbreadth(s) (noun)
fingerstick(s) (noun)
follow through (verb)
followthrough (noun)
follow up (verb)
followup, or follow-up (noun, adj.)
footdrop (noun)
foster child (noun)
gallbladder (noun)
gallstone(s) (noun)
grandchild (noun)
grand mal seizure(s) (noun)
grandparent (noun)
great-grandson (noun)
headache (noun)
healthcare (noun, adj.) (AHDI, AHIMA)
health care (noun) (AMWA, AMA)
health-care (adj.) (AMWA, AMA)
herpesvirus (noun)
hyaline membrane disease (noun)
Lake-Sumter Community College (two counties) (noun)
lightheaded (adj.)
lightheadedness (noun)
long-suffering (adj.)

matter-of-fact (adj.)
nail bed (noun)
nonweightbearing (adj.)
nose drops (noun)
physician(s) of record (noun)
piggyback (adj.)
pursestring (noun)
Seminole Community College (noun)
sickle cell disease (noun)
sickle cell trait (noun)
small-cell carcinoma (noun)
social service agency (noun)
stick-tie (noun)
stomachache (noun)
surgeon general (noun)
symptom-free (adj.)
tablespoonful(s) (noun)
teaspoonful(s) (noun)
third-spacing (noun)
toothache (noun)
unselfconscious (adj.)
up-to-date (adj.)
urinary tract infection (noun)
weightbearing (adj.)
zigzag (adj.)

Bibliography

- The AAMT Book of Style for Medical Transcription*, 2nd ed. (AHDI, Modesto, CA, 2002).
AMA Manual of Style, 10th ed. (JAMA, Oxford Press, NY, 2007).
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credit approved

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Hyphen Exercise

Instructions: Insert hyphens where you think they belong. Be able to explain your reasons!

1. This youngish, twenty odd year old female was admitted in acute distress.
2. The patient claims to have followed an 800 calorie diet for a 3 month period but with no weight loss.
3. I recommended a high fiber diet.
4. A 3 cm incision was made over the 7th rib.
5. He is to use his thigh length T.E.D. hose on his left lower extremity.
6. The albumin globulin ratio was 4.5 over 1.5 or 3.0.
7. X rays of the abdomen showed small air fluid levels and one dilated loop of small bowel.
8. The patient is a 28 year old African American male admitted with an infected human bite on the right hand.
9. IMPRESSION: Right sided pleural effusion, most likely on the basis of congestive heart failure.
10. There is a grade 2 to 3 low pitched aortic ejection systolic murmur heard best during expiration.
11. The subject is a normally developed and somewhat overweight white male.
12. In 8 weeks, we will do the full blown treadmill stress test, and based on that will make the final modification of his exercise program.
13. A clean voided urine showed 15 to 20 white blood cells per high power field, 8 to 10 red cells, 4+ occult blood, 1+ protein, negative for sugar, pH 5.5.
14. Fine needle aspiration revealed well differentiated small cell carcinoma.
15. NPH and regular insulin will be given on a split dose b.i.d. dosing regimen.
16. This is a 19 year old female college student who is seen with reference to vulvar pain and urinary burning of 2 to 2 1/2 days' duration.
17. Her heavy bleeding decreased the hematocrit to the 26% to 28% range.
18. The patient is a para 3, 2 0 1 2, Rh negative woman in her 36th week of pregnancy.
19. The patient was thought to have infected eczema or gram negative toe web infection.
20. GENERAL: Well developed, well nourished, English speaking Caucasian 17 year old.
21. Extremity exam reveals blistering cellulitis over the dorsum of the foot with swelling and extension of the abnormal coloration to the mid pretibial area.
22. The lower lip is still denuded and shows some granulation tissue where it had been deepithelialized by the disease.
23. On her right mid lower back, she has a medium brown, clinically benign, sharply marginated, evenly colored nevus, dermal in character, with normal skin lines.
24. The patient complains of a 2 to 3 week history of cough, with yellow phlegm for 2 days and emesis and abdominal pain the day prior to admission.
25. One half of the clips were removed today; the remainder will be removed in a couple of days at her 1st office visit.

Hyphen Exercise Answers

1. This youngish, 20-odd-year-old female was admitted in acute distress.
2. The patient claims to have followed an 800-calorie diet for a 3-month period but with no weight loss.
3. I recommended a high-fiber diet.
4. A 3 cm incision was made over the 7th rib.
- Note: The people behind the SI metric system have determined that there should be no punctuation used with metric units of measure; they even use a half space in place of commas in large numbers. English units of measure, such as 1-inch scar, will continue to be hyphenated, however.
5. He is to use his thigh-length T.E.D. hose on his left lower extremity.
6. The albumin-globulin ratio was 4.5 over 1.5 or 3.0.
Note: You would not use a slash for 4.5/1.5 because of the decimals and because of the *or* 3.0.
7. X-rays of the abdomen showed small air-fluid levels and one dilated loop of small bowel.
8. The patient is a 28-year-old African American male admitted with an infected human bite on the right hand.
9. IMPRESSION: Right-sided pleural effusion, most likely on the basis of congestive heart failure.
10. There is a grade 2 to 3 low-pitched aortic ejection systolic murmur heard best during expiration.
11. The subject is a normally developed and somewhat overweight white male.
12. In 8 weeks, we will do the full-blown treadmill stress test and, based on that, will make the final modification of his exercise program.
13. A clean-voided urine showed 15 to 20 [15-20] white blood cells per high-power field, 8 to 10 [8-10] red cells, 4+ occult blood, 1+ protein, negative for sugar, pH 5.5.
Note: *High-power* (not *high-powered*) is an adjective-noun compound.
14. Fine-needle aspiration revealed well-differentiated small-cell carcinoma.
15. NPH and regular insulin will be given on a split-dose b.i.d. dosing regimen.
16. This is a 19-year-old female college student who is seen with reference to vulvar pain and urinary burning of 2 to 2-1/2 days' duration.
- Note: You would not put 2-2-1/2 *days* because you don't want double hyphens.
17. Her heavy bleeding decreased the hematocrit to the 26% to 28% range.
Note: According to *The Book of Style for Medical Transcription*, the percent sign should be used with each number, and hyphens are not used with % signs.
18. The patient is a para 3, 2-0-1-2, Rh-negative woman in her 36th week of pregnancy.
19. The patient was thought to have infected eczema or gram-negative toe web infection.
Note: *Toe web infection* is a disease entity, so do not hyphenate *toe web*.
20. GENERAL: Well-developed, well-nourished, English-speaking Caucasian 17-year-old.
21. Extremity exam reveals blistering cellulitis over the dorsum of the foot with swelling and extension of the abnormal coloration to the mid-pretibial area.
Note: Although *mid* can sometimes be used alone as a word, I would hyphenate *mid* here because it modifies the phrase *pretibial area*.
22. The lower lip is still denuded and shows some granulation tissue where it had been de-epithelialized by the dis-ease.
Note: Although the trend is to omit hyphens between doubled vowels, I think *deepithelialized* would be more difficult to read without the hyphen.
23. On her right mid lower back, she has a medium-brown, clinically benign, sharply margined, evenly colored nevus, dermal in character, with normal skin lines.
24. The patient complains of a 2- to 3-week history of cough, with yellow phlegm for 2 days and emesis and abdominal pain the day prior to admission.
Note: This is an example of a suspensive hyphen; it represents a 2-week to 3-week history.
25. One half of the clips were removed today; the remainder will be removed in a couple of days at her first office visit.

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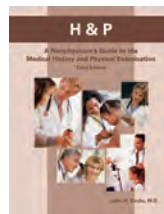
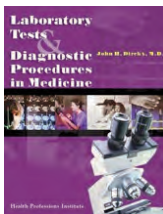
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