To Hyphenate or Not To Hyphenate After a Noun: That Is the Wrong Question

Asking questions is more important than finding answers—why?
—Tom Johnson, I’d Rather Be Writing blog

This job is long-term.
This job is long term.

Do you need the hyphen here? Most authorities say no. Don’t hyphenate a compound modifier when it follows the modified noun. Before the noun, yes (This is a long-term job), but after, no (This job is long term).

Most authorities also point out exceptions. They say that some compounds need a hyphen even when they follow the noun. Which compounds, though … razor-sharp? risk-averse? time-sensitive? all-encompassing? cost-effective? blue-green? Authorities disagree. Some defer to dictionaries, but you can’t necessarily go by a dictionary. As The Chicago Manual of Style says, “When such compounds follow the noun they modify, hyphenation is usually unnecessary, even for adjectival compounds that are hyphenated in Webster’s (such as well-read or ill-humored).”

Good luck figuring out blue-green vs. blue green, for example. According to Chicago, compound adjectives formed with color words are “hyphenated before but not after a noun.” On the other hand, Edward D. Johnson, author of The Handbook of Good English, says,

52. Ibid., 375.
when it comes to “noun + noun color compounds such as blue-green” following the noun, “I advise retaining the hyphen.”

Let’s look at one more can’t-win example: cost-effective vs. cost effective. Do we hyphenate this compound after a noun? Jane Watson, who calls herself “North America’s Grammar Guru,” says no. She would have us write, This program is cost effective. Just as definitively, the Case Western Reserve University Division of Student Affairs says yes. Their style guide would have us write, This method is cost-effective. Crazy-making! As John Benbow, once editor of the Oxford University Press stylebook, is widely quoted as warning, “If you take hyphens seriously, you will surely go mad.”

So much for seeking the right answer.

Happily, I’m seeking not a right answer but a right question. Most authorities don’t tell you that if you wonder, Do I need a hyphen here? after the modified noun, you ask the wrong question. They don’t tell you what you most need to know: that a post-noun modifier almost always follows a be-verb (is, are, was) or some other linking verb (seem, appear, become, remain, grow, get). And they don’t tell you that linking verbs almost always signal an opportunity to strengthen a sentence.

So what question should you ask yourself when faced, heaven forbid, with sentences like these?

This job is long term.
That child is razor-sharp.
The suit is blue-green (or blue green).

Ask yourself, *What do I have to say about that long-term job, that razor-sharp child, that blue-green suit?* Then, eliminate the linking verb (as described in “To Be or Not To Be” on page 13), and swap in some substance, some muscle:

This long-term job pays more than anyone in Joan’s family has ever made.

Those razor-sharp kids speak twelve languages.

Donovan thought that the blue-green suit made the professor look glamorous.

Then, maybe, you’ll have yourself a sentence worth reading.