
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*)."⁵¹

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."⁵² On the other hand, Edward D. Johnson, author of *The Handbook of Good English*, says,

51. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 373–374.

52. *Ibid.*, 375.

when it comes to “noun + noun color compounds such as *blue-green*” following the noun, “I advise retaining the hyphen.”⁵³

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*.⁵⁴ 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*.⁵⁵ 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.”⁵⁶

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).

53. Johnson, *The Handbook of Good English*, 204.

54. Jane Watson, “Hyphens with Adjectives,” *BizWritingTip* blog, March 13, 2012, <http://bizwritingtip.com/?p=2952>.

55. “Commonly Mis-hyphenated Words,” Student Affairs IT Operations Group Website Management writing style guide, Case Western Reserve University, 2012, <http://studentaffairs.case.edu/support/web/style/hyphenwords.html>.

56. John Benbow, *Manuscript & Proof: The Preparation of Manuscript for the Printer and the Handling of the Proofs*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), 92.

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.