
Hyphens Unite!

It pains me to say this, but I may be getting too mature for details.

—JERRY SEINFELD, *SEINFELD*

My friend Mark notes that hyphens seem to be disappearing. “Not sure why,” he says. “Hyphens make reading easier.” He’s talking about those times when two or more adjectives join forces, working together as a compound adjective (also known as a phrasal adjective or unit modifier) in front of a noun. One of my favorite examples comes from a sign not far from my neighborhood. In large letters, it gives this command: *Fear Free Dentistry*. Maybe these dentists intend to scare people away from free dentistry. Probably, though, they intend to advertise fear-free dentistry. (Their omission scares me away. I don’t want anyone that sloppy coming at me with a drill.)

Does the lowly hyphen—that dinky half-dash, that barely-there conjoiner of words, that “pest of the punctuation family”⁴⁵—deserve a whole essay in a book on writing powerfully? Is any punctuation mark less emblematic of power? If you were choosing teammates, you’d pick the hyphen last. A hyphen doesn’t even merit sand in the face; bullies simply ignore it, inflicting the ultimate humiliation: leaving it out.

But when you see the hyphen for what it is, when you take the time to appreciate its unique qualities, you’ll find it a powerful ally indeed.

Example:

true blue friend

45. Sophie C. Hadida, *Your Telltale English* (rev. ed. 1942), 133, quoted in Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, 679.

Word Up!

Do you need a hyphen here? Try this test: say each adjective (*true* and *blue*) with the noun separately. *True friend*. That makes sense. *Blue friend*. That makes sense only if you're talking about a Smurf. So you don't have a true blue friend. *True* and *blue* work together. Call on the hyphen's unifying force, and you've got a true-blue friend.

Try the test on *clean energy consultant*. Pair each adjective with *consultant* separately. *Energy consultant*. That almost makes sense. *Clean consultant*. That makes sense only if the consultant just took a shower. *Clean* and *energy* work together: clean-energy consultant.

Other hyphenless headscratchers:

sick ward nurse (a ward nurse with the flu)

light green suitcase (a green suitcase that weighs little)

ride on mower (a ride on a mower)

little used cigar (eww!)

Usually, people can decipher a phrase like this from its context—after they stop, go back, and reread the words. But why make them reread? Why slow them down when a hyphen could speed them along? For example, let's say you run a prestigious hospital, and you're about to print a full-page ad on the back cover of the *New York Times Magazine* with this headline (complete with these unfortunate line breaks):

A Father
Son Bond So Close,
They're Joined At
The Liver.

You'd want to stop the press and unite *father* and *son* (father-son bond...) rather than force people—millions of people in this case—to stop and reread a headline that so inappropriately separates this dad from this boy.⁴⁶

46. This hyphenless headline, which splashed across the back cover of the *New York Times Magazine* on November 27, 2011, also suffers from a noun-pronoun mismatch. Grammatically, the *they* refers to the would-be subject, *bond*, as if to say, "The bond

Should you always hyphenate a compound adjective (that is, two or more words working as one adjective) when those words come right before a noun? Some say yes. Commonly, though, when a whole phrase, noun and all, becomes widely recognized, the hyphen disappears. For example, even in the language-usage-curmudgeon-filled-technical-writing world, the hyphen has all but dropped out of certain common terms, like *content management system* or (more controversially in the curmudgeonliest circles) *quick reference card*. Those comfortable with these omissions argue that, in these cases, the hyphen no longer has a job to do.

**In large letters, the sign
gives this command:
*Fear Free Dentistry.***

In support of the dehyphenation of frequently used phrases, writer Edward Johnson notes that

“whereas *science-fiction writer* would normally be hyphenated, in a work that used the compound constantly it would not be: *Science fiction has changed since the days of early science fiction writers Jules Verne and H. G. Wells.*”⁴⁷

I rarely omit the hyphen, even in frequently used phrases. Sometimes a style guide (or a boss) tells me to leave it out in certain contexts, and so I do. Otherwise, though, if the hyphen’s knack for uniting could prevent even a few readers from stumbling, why not send the little guy in? As Johnson goes on to say, “Even the most familiar compounds can be ambiguous, and the writer, who knows the intended meaning, often will not notice the ambiguity; only the reader will.”⁴⁸ *The Chicago Manual of Style* says, “With the exception of proper nouns (such as *United States*) and compounds formed by an adverb ending in *ly* plus an adjective ... it is never incorrect to hyphenate adjectival compounds before a noun.”⁴⁹ Usage authority Bryan Garner states the risk of going

are joined at the liver.” Ouch again. Not the best way for a hospital to advertise its attention to detail.

47. Edward D. Johnson, *The Handbook of Good English: Revised and Updated* (New York: Facts on File, 1991), 205.

48. *Ibid.*, 205.

49. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 373.

hyphenless this way: “almost all sentences with unhyphenated phrasal adjectives will be misread by *someone*.”⁵⁰

By all means, hyphenate when you find yourself in compounds-comprising-more-than-two-words situations—or better yet, rewrite!

Try this exercise in empathy. Read the following sentence in slow motion, as if you were sliding a strip of paper across the words to the right, revealing one word at a time.

Marie’s dad swears that next December he will avoid the last minute shopping frenzy.

You reach *avoid the last* with no trouble. Then *minute*. Split-second pause. Did Marie’s dad want to avoid the last minute? You read on: *last minute shopping*. Aha! You back up and mentally insert a hyphen: *last-minute shopping*. There. Now, onward again: *frenzy*. Wait. Yet another hyphenless space—this time the one between *minute* and *shopping*—has stopped us. Did this dad want to avoid only the last-minute kind of shopping frenzy? Maybe next year he plans to hit the earlier shopping frenzies? How can we read on? How can we make sense of it all? We need another hyphen to come to the rescue: *last-minute-shopping frenzy*. Ahh. Reason is restored.

Save your readers from such distress with a little help from an under-celebrated hero. Hyphens, unite!

50. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, 627.