

Hyphens: Let's Stay Together

(adapted from Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*)

The Greek phrase from which we derive the word “hyphen” meant “under one” or “into one” or “together” (Truss 142). As Lynne Truss explains, this potentially means this often-omitted and ignored punctuation mark is sexier in its linguistic origins than often imagined! ☺

In traditional usage, the hyphen “joins together words, or words-with-prefixes, to aid understanding; it keeps certain other words neatly apart with an identical intention” (Truss 142).

Current usages for the hyphen:

1. Many words require hyphens to avoid ambiguity; words such as “co-respondent,” “re-formed,” “re-mark.” (e.g. A re-formed rock band is quite different from a reformed one. Likewise, a long-standing friend is different from a long standing one. A cross-section of the public is quite different from a cross section of the public).
2. It is still necessary to use hyphens when spelling out numbers, such as thirty-two, forty-nine.
3. When linking nouns with nouns such as the London-Brighton train; also adjectives with adjectives: American-French relation; also noun-adjective pairs; *Austin-American Statesman*.
4. When a noun phrase such as “stainless steel” is used to qualify another noun, it is hyphenated, as “stainless-steel kitchen.” The football game has a second half, but lots of second-half excitement.
5. Certain prefixes traditionally require hyphens: un-American, anti-Apartheid, pro-hyphens, quasi-grammatical (when in doubt, a dictionary will elucidate for you!).

6. When words are to be spelled out, it is customary to use hyphens to indicate you want the letters enunciated (or pictured) separately: (L-O-N-G-H-O-R-N-S).
7. The hyphen is used to avoid unpleasant linguistic collision called “letter-collision,” such as “deice” (de-ice) or “shelllike” “shell-like.”
8. One of the main uses of the hyphen is to indicate a word is unfinished and continues on to the next line (especially on those written exams!). Please consider syllables and sense when splitting words. (pains-taking, not pain-staking).
9. When a hyphenated phrase is coming up, and you are qualifying it beforehand, it is necessary to write, “He was a two- or three-year-old.”