Using hyphens

This is only a basic guide. If you have any suggestions, corrections or improvements, please contact us. You can contact us at:

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Using hyphens

The main use of a hyphen is to join two or more words together.

Sometimes a word needs a hyphen for it to be spelt correctly. For example:
- one-off
- part-time
- face-to-face

In some situations there are no hard and fast rules and the use of hyphens is a matter of personal preference. However, there are some guidelines on when you should use them.

**In compound adjectives (single adjectives formed from two or more words) that appear before a noun**
For example:
- An up-to-date guide is a guide that is up to date.
- Income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance is a benefit that is based on your income.
- An energy-efficient fridge is one that is energy efficient.

These hyphens are often necessary to avoid confusion. For example:
- A blue-collared shirt is a shirt with a blue collar, while a blue collared shirt could be a blue shirt that has a collar.
- A French-dictionary salesman is a man who sells French dictionaries, while a French dictionary salesman could be a Frenchman who sells dictionaries.
- A red-wine bottle is a bottle for red wine, while a red wine bottle could be a wine bottle that is red.

**To distinguish one word from a similar one**
For example:
- re-sort, not resort
- co-op, not coop
- re-form, not reform

**With prefixes**
Some words formed with a prefix are always hyphenated. For example:
- self-employed
- pro-family
- anti-aircraft

With some prefixes, a hyphen is not necessary but is preferable to help with pronunciation, avoid a double vowel, or stop a word looking odd. For example:
- co-ordinate
- re-enter
- de-ice
When numbers between 21 and 99 are written out in full
For example:
- twenty-one
- ninety-nine
- one hundred and thirty-four (Note that only ‘thirty-four’ is hyphenated.)

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