

COMPOUND ADJECTIVES

Compound adjectives describe nouns but use more than one word to do so. When those compound adjectives appear before the noun they describe, they should be hyphenated so as to avoid creating confusion as to which two words pair to create compound meaning.

In the following sentence, for example, readers may not be certain if “severe” describes the “weather” or the “weather alert.”

- I just received a severe weather alert on my phone.

Writers can avoid that potential confusion by, instead, hyphenating the compound adjective:

- I just received a severe-weather alert on my phone.

A few more examples:

- **Incorrect:** The new laws most affected blue state politicians.
- **Correct:** The new laws most affected blue-state politicians.

- **Incorrect:** Louise Brooks was silent movie star.
- **Correct:** Louise Brooks was a silent-movie star.

Note: If the compound adjective appears after the noun it modifies, it does not need to be hyphenated because the sentence structure makes clear which words provide description.

- I just received an alert concerning severe weather.
- The new laws most affected politicians from blue states.
- Louise Brooks was a star in silent movies.

Also Note: Combining an adverb and an adjective does not create a compound adjective because the adverb modifies the adjective and not the noun. Such phrasings, therefore, do not require hyphens.

- **Incorrect:** The speaker confronted several commonly-held opinions.
- **Correct:** The speaker confronted several commonly held opinions.

- **Incorrect:** Don DeLillo is a critically-acclaimed author.
- **Correct:** Don DeLillo is a critically acclaimed author.