To Hyphenate or Not-to-Hyphenate?

To figure out if a book has been professionally edited (and not just proofed for spelling by Cousin Agnes, the English major), I look inside to see if Acknowledgments and Foreword are spelled correctly. Then I check a few pages for commas and hyphens. Badly done, they signal sloppy self-publication. Are you hyphen savvy?

Insert or delete hyphens, as appropriate, in the following sentences:

1. The self-publishing expert was a highly-motivated promoter with a little-used brain.
   a. self-publishing (Compounds created by adding a prefix are normally written as one word, unhyphenated, with several exceptions. Always use hyphens to connect the prefixes all, ex, quasi, and self in compound words.)
   b. highly motivated (Avoid hyphens after –ly words. The reader will expect the –ly word to modify the word that follows it. [Don’t use the hyphen even between an -ly adverb + adjective combination in front of a noun or pronoun.])
   c. “little-used brain” if seldom used; “little used brain” if the used brain was small. (Use hyphens where they prevent confusion.)
2. The vice-president and president-elect were looking for a shell-like, anti-inflationary product.
   a. vice president and president-elect (Don’t hyphenate vice president; do hyphenate president-elect.)
   b. shell-like, anti-inflationary product (Insert hyphens to avoid doubled vowels or triple consonants that cause confusion or are awkward to read. “Cooperate,” “coordinate,” and “reestablish” are no longer considered awkward, but a hyphen is needed to distinguish a food “co-op” from a chicken “coop.”)
3. Her up-to-date meeting notes came out from 1973-81.
4. He’s a four-year-old boy. She’s a four year old. Their friend is four years old.
5. It was a tongue-in-cheek expression. I repeat: It was tongue in cheek.
6. She recovered the sofa the kids had stained; then she recovered the car the wild animal trainer had stolen.
7. John had a two-thirds interest and got two thirds of the revenues. Henry got only a one-third share.

ANSWERS:

Correct answers (rules in parentheses)

1. The self-publishing expert was a highly-motivated promoter with a little-used brain.
2. The vice-president and president-elect were looking for a shell-like, anti-inflationary product.
3. Her up-to-date meeting notes came out from 1973 to [or through] 1981.
a. Her up-to-date meeting notes (but it would be “her meeting notes were up to date”). (Use hyphens where two or more consecutive words make sense only when understood together as a single idea modifying a noun that follows, making a compound adjective. Do not hyphenate them when they come after the noun.)

b. from 1973 to [or through] 1981 or between 1973 and 1981 (Don’t use the hyphen that indicates a range of dates to substitute for words. You could say: “Her meeting notes (1973–81) were up to date.” Also note that an en dash (–) instead of a hyphen (-) is preferred with a date range.)

4. He’s a four-year-old boy. She’s a four-year-old. Their friend is four years old.

a. She’s a four-year-old [the noun is assumed]. The rest is correct. (Hyphenate ages only if they are used as adjectives before the word they modify.)

5. It was a tongue-in-cheek expression. I repeat: It was tongue in cheek.

a. No errors. Same principle as 3a. (Do not hyphenate most compound modifiers if they occur after the noun being modified, even if hyphenating them before the noun.)

6. She re-covered the sofa the kids had stained; then she recovered the car the wild-animal trainer had stolen.

a. She re-covered the sofa [covered it again] but recovered the car [got it back]. (Use hyphens where they prevent confusion. In particular, use a hyphen with “re-” only when “re-” means again and omitting the hyphen creates a confusing word. Thus, “He re-signed the contract before resigning from office,” “She re-created the scene.”)

b. wild-animal trainer (if he trained wild animals) or “wild animal trainer” (if the trainer himself was wild) (Use hyphens to avoid ambiguity.)

7. John had a two-thirds interest and got two thirds of the revenues. Henry got only a one-third share.

a. No errors. (Hyphenate fractions as adjectives, if they are spelled out. Do not hyphenate them as nouns.)

For more on proper hyphenation, check out:

- University of Minnesota: www1.umn.edu/urelate/style/hyphens.html
- The Chicago Manual of Style sections 7.82–7.90
- The Chicago Manual of Style online Q&A: www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/CMS_FAQ/HyphensEnDashesEmDashes/HyphensEnDashesEmDashes_questions01.html

Pat McNees (www.patmcnees.com) was a book editor (Harper & Row and Fawcett) before becoming an independent journalist, writer, and editor (www.writersandeditors.com). You’ll find more links to helpful explanations of grammar here: www.writersandeditors.com/work4.htm.

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