Before and After: An Easy-to-Remember Rule for Using the Compound Modifier

By Roberto Lewis

Learning the correct way to hyphenate a compound modifier will help you to produce well-written sentences with confidence.

Or, perhaps they would be "well written."

When your goal in writing a press release is to communicate the value of a product or service quickly and clearly, you might find yourself using more than a few compound modifiers, also known as adjectival phrases. Compound modifiers combine two or more words to convey a single idea. When they modify a noun, they can describe it with more specificity than a simple adjective would.

For example:

She drove a red 1966 Corvette coupe.

She drove a cherry-red 1966 Corvette coupe.

She drove a tricked-out, blood-red 1966 Corvette coupe.

In a press release, you might refer to the long-term goals of an organization, or a top-rated manufacturing center, packed to the brim with state-of-the-art technology.

But isn't it also correct to refer to strategies that are appropriate "for the long term," or to the phrase, "state of the art?"

When a compound modifier appears in a sentence before the noun it is meant to modify, it should be hyphenated, in order to avoid confusion as to how the different parts of the phrase work together.

A common example:

The mayor plans to meet with small business owners all afternoon.

Are the businesses small, or are the owners unusually short?

The mayor plans to meet with small-business owners all afternoon. Now it is clear to the reader exactly what is small.

We were lucky to find a 24-hour pharmacy.
Tropical-fruit researchers paid close attention to the findings.
Brett has a well-established reputation as a liar and a thief.

If the compound modifier shows up after the noun it modifies, hyphens will

usually not be necessary:

We were lucky to find a pharmacy that stayed open 24 hours.
Jennifer is a researcher of tropical fruit.
Brett's reputation as a liar and a thief is well established.

You should not hyphenate a compound modifier if part of the construction is an adverb anding in -ly:

She ended her speech with a smoothly delivered toast to the parents in the audience.

You should, however, hyphenate such a construction if it is part of a longer adjectival phrase:

We cringed throughout his not-so-smoothly-delivered apology to the bride.

There are also exceptions, such as short-lived, which should be hyphenated in every case. As always, when in doubt, consult your style guide.