

Punctuation



Hyphens—1

Hyphens are used in the following circumstances:

1. To join two or more words together to avoid ambiguity.
2. To indicate that a word has been broken across two lines.
3. To link numbers.

1. Using a hyphen to join two words together

It is helpful to your readers to hyphenate words in situations where the meaning could otherwise be ambiguous. For example, is “a spare room heater” a heater for the spare room, or a heater that isn’t currently being used? Add a hyphen in the appropriate place to clarify the meaning: “a spare-room heater” or “a spare room-heater”.

How many times have you had to read a sentence two or three times to try and make sense of it? The thoughtful use of hyphens will make your sentences much clearer.

When you hear the expression “The police searched the suspect’s room with a fine tooth comb” do you wonder exactly what that means? What is a tooth comb? Who do you know that combs their teeth? It’s a bit of a puzzle, isn’t it? This particular phrase is so much misunderstood that we have even seen it abbreviated to “The police searched the suspect’s room with a tooth comb.”

Let’s try adding a well-placed hyphen:

“The police searched the suspect’s room with a fine-tooth comb.”

Now it makes sense! It’s the comb that has fine teeth, not the teeth that are being combed.

(This phrase originates from the use of a nit comb—a special comb with finely-spaced teeth used for combing nits and lice out of hair.)

(Note: The grammatically correct version is actually “fine-toothed comb”).

Thanks to *The Dilbert Newsletter* for the following anecdote:

In Vancouver I drove past a group of concerned parents protesting the presence of prostitutes in their neighborhood. They were carrying signs that read, “Keep our street prostitution free”!

They were getting a lot of support from passing motorists.

To make sure that they were correctly understood, the signs should have read “Keep our street prostitution-free”.

This is a sample page from *The Grammar Cookbook*. For more examples and information, please see www.trackerpress.com.