

Compound Words

Compound words generally develop over time through use. As people continue to use two or more previously unrelated words together, the combination gains acceptance. After a while, words that began as two separate words may become hyphenated or joined into one word. For example, earlier rules told us to keep compound words beginning with “web” as two words, like web site, web page, and web server. However, more and more, we are seeing website spelled as one word. Sometimes, we can spell a word as one word or two words depending on how we use it in the sentence, such as “anyone” and “any one,” or “everyone” and “every one.” Usually, they are spelled as one word unless they are followed by “of” and mean “a particular one among a number of things.”

Unfortunately, this progression doesn't follow a consistent, regular pattern. The word experts can't even agree on rules for compound words. To compound the problem, I couldn't even get my WORD editor to agree with me after I looked up words in the dictionary. The only way to be sure of the current spelling is to check a very recent dictionary and hope for the best. To illustrate, recognizing the risk of confusing you further, I'll offer a few rules that I found in *The Gregg Reference Manual, Ninth Edition*:

- Compound nouns ending in “up” are one word or hyphenated.

Checkup
Roundup
Pileup

Close-up
Sign-up
Follow-up

But caution: If you use the same word as a verb phrase, each word stands alone. Example: I will follow up on your suggestion next week. Then, I will give you a detailed follow-up on my results.

- Most compound nouns ending in “down” are one word.

Showdown
Breakdown
Sundown

Meltdown
Slowdown
Countdown

But caution: If you try to give someone a “put-down,” you need a hyphen.

- Compound nouns ending in “in” usually take a hyphen, but compound nouns ending in “out” are usually one word.

Break-in
Trade-in
Sit-in
Drive-in

Dropout
Standout
Sellout
Buyout

Of course, I have another caution: You must give your children a "time-out," and when you eat dinner, it may become a "pig-out."

- Compound nouns ending in "on" usually get a hyphen, while compound nouns ending in "off" are either one word or hyphenated

Add-on

Carry-on

Run-on

Follow-on

Layoff

Takeoff

Show-off

Send-off

But, you have to "login" and "logoff" from your computer.

Another rule tells us that compound nouns with a prepositional phrase get hyphens. That give us an "attorney-at-law," a "brother-in-law," and a "right-of-way." But we still have a "power of attorney," a "line of credit," a "rule of thumb," and a "standard of living."

I suggest you get a good dictionary and keep it close at hand!