

tutorials

■ OUR GUIDE TO ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS FOR EVERY DESIGNER

METHOD: Splitting hairs: when and when not to hyphenate

Too many hyphenated words at the end of lines makes text ugly and harder to read. Fortunately, DTP apps have sophisticated ways of controlling them.



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When hyphenation is wrongly applied, the results can be disastrous. Take this example: the opening of Chapter 8 of Bill Bryson's *Short History of Nearly Everything*, as displayed in the Kindle app on the iPhone [1]. Hyphenating the word 'universe' looks ridiculous; more subtly, the lack of a hyphen in the third from last line is ungainly. Here, we'll look at how and where to use hyphenation effectively, and examine some of the common techniques for adjusting the effect to produce the most attractive, harmonious results. Hyphens are ugly, but often necessary, so your goal is to reduce their use, not eliminate it.

Hyphenation is most commonly needed when setting long words in a narrow column. Without hyphenation, ugly white gaps can appear between the words, breaking up the

visual flow of the text and causing the reader to stumble over the layout [2]. When you activate automatic hyphenation, these white gaps disappear as words are intelligently split over two lines: the result is a much cleaner visual appearance [3]. However, you still need to pay attention to the number of hyphens that appear on consecutive lines. In the previous example, the three hyphenated words in a row look uncomfortable and draw attention to themselves. In conventional book or magazine publishing, the text should be read without the reader noticing the design: when attention is drawn in this way to the string of hyphens, it's harder for the reader to concentrate on the words themselves.

The solution is to limit the number of hyphens allowed to appear consecutively. Three is clearly too many; indeed, some would say that even two hyphens in a row produces an ugly result. When you limit the number of consecutive hyphens, the text appears much more readable [4]. Although there are now somewhat wide gaps between the words on the second line, this appearance is preferable to the string of hyphens down the right-hand margin.

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As the nineteenth century drew to a close, scientists could reflect with satisfaction that they had pinned down most of the mysteries of the physical world: electricity, magnetism, gases, optics, acoustics, kinetics and statistical mechanics, to

Without hyphenation, oversized words can result in unfortunate spacing irregularities.

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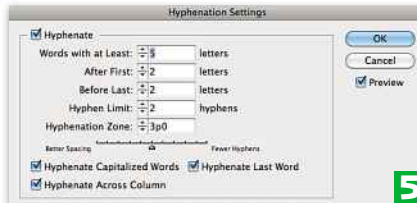
Without hyphenation, oversized words can result in unfortunate spacing irregularities.

3

1

Without hyphenation, oversized words can result in unfortunate spacing irregularities.

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Hyphenation is mainly designed to prevent large white spaces between words.

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Hyphenation is mainly designed to prevent large white spaces between words.

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Hyphenation is often designed to prevent large white spaces between words.

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Hyphenation is often designed to prevent large white spaces between words.

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Hyphenation is often used in cases of hypersensitisation to the overall design aesthetic.

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Hyphenation can cause place names, including Leominster, to be hard to read.

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All page layout applications, and many word processors, offer a set of hyphenation controls that enable you to fine-tune the way hyphens are applied to text. The dialog shown here [5] is from Adobe InDesign, but the principle applies to other applications as well.

The first consideration is the number of letters a word must contain in order for it to be eligible for hyphenation. The default in InDesign is five letters, which for most purposes is too short: would you really want to see a word such as 'do-ing' split across two lines? Far better, surely, to move the whole word onto the next line, adding as much space as is required to the previous line to space out the words. After all, the space required to compensate for just two additional letters should be minimal.

You can also determine how many characters should appear before a hyphen and how many after using the After First and Before Last controls. With both set to two letters, you allow the program to split a word such as 'de-signed', which may be just about acceptable when set in very narrow text columns [6]. Two letters is the absolute minimum; three is better for greater readability. The problem is that if you disable hyphenation, the words on the first line are spaced too much: there was already a large amount of spacing caused by the nature of the words, and disallowing the hyphen simply makes those spaces larger [7].

The value of two letters before the end of the word means a word such as 'design-ed' can be hyphenated so that just the final two letters will appear on the following line. As a

general principle, this produces unattractive results, so this figure is usually best changed to three letters for a smoother appearance.

The number of characters before and after depends on the width of the text column. In magazines, with narrow columns, you'd use a few letters before and after a hyphen; when setting books, the much wider margin means you can use a setting for four or more characters either side of a hyphen.

In general, you can turn off hyphenation when using left-aligned (ragged) text, as the

'You may need to hyphenate ragged text, such as when an especially long word appears'

appearance of extra white space at the end of a line is rarely a problem. With the default settings, words will continue to be hyphenated according to the standard before/after rules [8]. Here, though, the hyphen is unnecessary; nothing is lost by moving the whole word onto the next line [9].

There are times, though, when you need to hyphenate even ragged text, such as when an especially long word appears [10]. Here, the huge gap on the second line looks like a mistake. When we hyphenate this text, the words flow far more easily [11]. In such cases, look at the Hyphenation Zone setting, which determines the minimum amount of white space that must appear at the end of a line before hyphenation kicks in.

Another option in the Hyphenation Settings dialog determines whether capitalised words are hyphenated to prevent proper nouns such as people and places from being hyphenated. Because they're less commonly seen, it can be hard to interpret an unusual name if it's split across two lines [12]. With hyphenation disabled, and the word bunched up on the line, you can read it far more clearly [13].

You can also set whether the last word of a paragraph should be hyphenated. This almost always looks odd [14], so the feature is best turned off [15]. Finally, you can set whether a hyphen is allowed to appear at the bottom of a column. This is also undesirable, particularly when it involves a page turn.

When setting small amounts of text, you can turn off automatic hyphenation, adding manual hyphens where needed. These are 'discretionary hyphens'. Don't type a normal hyphen in the middle of a word, since if the text reflows later, the hyphen will move with it and look ridiculous in the middle of a line. Instead, choose Type > Insert Special Character > Hyphens And Dashes > Discretionary Hyphen, or use the shortcut Cmd-Shift-hyphen. Discretionary hyphens will appear as hyphens, splitting the word, if it appears at the end of a line, but are otherwise invisible.

Correct use of hyphenation should make the text more readable; incorrect use will simply serve to distract the reader. As a general rule of thumb, then, you should never hyphenate headlines, rarely hyphenate left-aligned text, and always allow hyphens in justified text unless the column is sufficiently wide for this to be unnecessary. 