

CAFL Appellate Writing Tip

April 25, 2019

Hyphens for Ages and Duration

The most common punctuation errors we see in briefs involve hyphens. Here are some good rules of thumb:

If the age or duration serves as an adjective that modifies a noun and comes before that noun, hyphenate the entire phrase.

- DCF removed three-year-old Sarah on July 1, 2016.
- The judge refused to place the children with Aunt Lucy based on her ten-year-old drug offense.
- The wishes of a ten-year-old child must be considered.
- Mother never addressed her seven-year substance abuse problem.
- Ann is a well-adjusted three-year-old. (The word “child” is understood.)

In any other context, do not use hyphens.

- Sarah was three years old when DCF removed her.
- The judge refused to place the children with Aunt Lucy because she had a drug offense that was ten years old.
- Because Robert was ten years old at the time of trial, the judge was required to consider his wishes regarding custody.

Hyphenate all compound numbers from twenty-one through ninety-nine.

- Mother is twenty-four years old. (Don’t connect the word “years” with a hyphen.) BUT:
- Mother is 24 years old.

For more tips, see The Chicago Manual of Style’s Hyphenation Table, available at:
https://1nvz10445pvh2n73t2xwcmah-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/hyphenation_table_cmos.pdf

See also <https://www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/hyphens.asp>

