

English Grammar – Plurals of Compound Nouns

Many compound nouns in English contain a hyphen. So how do we pluralize such nouns? For example, what is the plural of “brother-in-law”?

- brothers-in-law ?
- brother-in-laws ?
- brothers-in-laws ?

Well, there are, in fact, only two cases to be considered:

1. Noun+Preposition/Adjective. Rule: Only pluralize the noun.

Examples:

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| • passer-by | passers-by | Meaning: pedestrian who is passing |
| • hanger-on | hangers-on | Meaning: sycophant |
| • court-martial | courts-martial | Meaning: military court action |
| • brother-in-law | brothers-in-law | Meaning: brother of wife/husband of sister |
| • bird-of-prey | birds-of-prey | Meaning: bird hunter |

2. All other cases (including noun+noun). Rule: Only add ‘s’ at the end.

Examples:

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|---------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| • check-in | check-ins | Meaning: registration |
| • build-up | build-ups | Meaning: escalation/accumulation |
| • take-out | take-outs | Meaning: food order |
| • grown-up | grown-ups | Meaning: adult |
| • filler-in | filler-ins | Meaning: substitute |
| • run-in | run-ins | Meaning: argument/fight |
| • start-up | start-ups | Meaning: new company |
| • forget-me-not | forget-me-nots | Meaning: romantic souvenir |
| • go-between | go-betweens | Meaning: middle-man |
| • also-ran | also-rans | Meaning: not winner (in a race) |
| • great-grandmother | great-grandmothers | Meaning: mother of mother/father |
| • kilowatt-hour | kilowatt-hours | Meaning: unit of power consumption |
| • vice-president | vice-presidents | Meaning: assistant president |
| • plea-bargain | plea-bargains | Meaning: legal arrangement |
| • drive-by | drive-bys | Meaning: mobile shooting |
| • get-together | get-togethers | Meaning: informal meeting |
| • follow-up | follow-ups | Meaning: continuation |
| • cop-out | cop-outs | Meaning: excuse |

Source: https://www.grammar-monster.com/lessons/plurals_forming_compound_nouns.htm

Note. Unhyphenated compound nouns simply use an ‘s’ at the end: backups, notebooks, etc.

Exercise. Pluralize the following compound nouns.

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| 1. president-elect | _____ | Meaning: elected as next president |
| 2. by-product | _____ | Meaning: produced as a side effect |
| 3. do-gooder | _____ | Meaning: person who does good |
| 4. attorney-at-law | _____ | Meaning: lawyer in the USA |
| 5. no-brainer | _____ | Meaning: very easy problem |
| 6. great-grandson | _____ | Meaning: son of son/daughter |
| 7. parent-in-law | _____ | Meaning: father/mother-in-law |
| 8. walkie-talkie | _____ | Meaning: 2-way radio |
| 9. water-bottle | _____ | Meaning: bottle for water |
| 10. merry-go-round | _____ | Meaning: carousel |

