

## Using Dashes Correctly

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**Summary:** Discusses the three different types of dashes (the em-dash, the en-dash, and the 3-em dash).

**Learning Objectives:** To describe the difference between dashes and hyphens. To identify when to use each of the three dashes correctly. To describe some of the rhetorical functions of the em-dash.

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When it comes to dashes and hyphens, many people think that they are the same, but in fact dashes are used within sentences (usually to emphasize separation of ideas or lists), while hyphens are used to connect compound words and some prefixes. This handout focuses on how to use dashes correctly. There are actually three different types of dashes: the em-dash, the en-dash, and the 3-em dash.

The em-dash can be used to replace parentheses, colons, and commas. Generally, using the em-dash makes the writing style more informal—as if you were writing to an old friend. Create an em dash by typing two hyphens without spaces between the hyphens and no spaces before or after the hyphens. Em-dashes are not generally used in formal documents.

The en-dash is used between dates and times, and the 3-em dash is used to signal omitted information in certain (often legal) situations. The en-dash can be created by pushing down the ALT key and typing 0150, while the 3-em dash is created by typing six hyphens. Let's discuss each type of dash more fully.

### Em-Dash

Again, the em-dash can be used to replace parentheses, colons, and commas. It may be particularly useful when you need to set off information that already contains some sort of punctuation, like commas. Em-dashes can be used to suggest an afterthought, to set off extra information within a sentence, to signal an abrupt shift, and to emphasize a thought or sentence.

### To Summarize or Illustrate a Thought

Em-dashes can be used to summarize or illustrate a thought as in the example below.

Ex. Freud found the three structures of the psyche—id, ego, and superego.

In this example, the “id, ego, and superego” further illustrate or define the three structures of the psyche. So, why might you decide to use a dash here instead of a colon or a set of parentheses?

Let's discuss the example below a little further.



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Ex: Freud found the three structures of the psyche: id, ego, and superego.

Ex. Freud found the three structures of the psyche (id, ego, and superego).

Ex. Freud found the three structures of the psyche—id, ego, and superego.

All three of these examples are grammatically correct, but the levels of formality and the rhetorical effects are different. The examples that use the colon and the parentheses are considered more formal, while the dashes lend a more informal feel to the sentence. Importantly, these examples also have different meanings.



The use of the colon forces the emphasis in the sentence to the list itself, making the list the point of the sentence. The parenthesis has the opposite effect: “the structures of the psyche” is more important than the list. The parentheses suggest that the list can be dropped from the sentence—it isn’t essential to the meaning of the sentence or paragraph. Again, the use of the dash is the most informal and suggests here that the list is an extension, afterthought, or aside to the discussion.

### **To Set off Extra Information in a Sentence**

Em-dashes can also be used to set off extra information in a sentence. You can think of em-dashes like commas that set off extra information (a non-restrictive clause) in a sentence.

To make this comparison clearer, here is an example of a sentence that uses commas and then an example of a sentence with dashes.

Ex: The behaviorists, Ivan Pavlov, B. F. Skinner, and John B. Watson, seem to be the most common of the names that people know in psychology.

Ex: Most of the car companies—GM, Ford, and Chrysler—are having financial problems because of the bad economy.

Notice that the dashes (because of the white space they create around the list) make the list more prominent.

### **To Signal an Abrupt Shift**

Another way to use em-dashes is when you want to signal an abrupt stop or interruption, often in dialogue.

Ex: “I just want to say that I do not deserve—,” Bonnie ran away as fast as she could before Jason could finish his statement.

Ex: I don’t really want to stay at Aunt Susan’s house—you know how messy her house is—because she always wants me to help clean the house.

Notice how this use of the em-dash signals a shift in person and tone.

### **To Emphasize a Thought or Sentence**

The final way that you can use em-dash is when you are trying to be dramatic or to emphasize a concluding commentary on the rest of the sentence.

Ex: Some small businesses will make it through this hard time—but most will not.



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Notice that the dash here functions to emphasize that the commentary that follows the dash counters what comes before it.

Hint: If you overuse em-dashes, the emphasis will be lost and the audience will not take the dashes as serious or dramatic.



### En-Dash

Compared to the uses of the em-dash, the uses of the en-dash can be considered formal, but there are limited situations in which the en-dash can be used.

The en-dash can only be used between times, dates, and forms of indexing.

Ex: World War II (1939-1945) resulted in the weakness of Germany.

Ex: I have to work 2:30-7:00 p.m. on Friday.

Ex: If you follow column D to row 7, it would be called D-7.

### 3-Em Dash

3-em dashes are generally used to omit a name that should not be disclosed or to signal that word(s) have been left out.

This particular dash is normally used in legal documents to protect the innocent. You can either use six hyphens or use an underscore.

Ex: The case between ----- and ----- will start tomorrow around 2 p.m.

### Practice Exercises

Test your understanding about how to use dashes by using em- en- or 3-em dashes in the sentences below. You may need to replace current punctuation and/or fix dashes that are used incorrectly. Check your answers by looking at the section titled “answers” below.

1. The siblings, Carl, Dirk, and Ashleigh, want to go to the water park today instead of tomorrow.
2. The less Bryce thought about his situation, the more he calmed down, even relaxed a little.
3. The two business men—and--are going to be prosecuted for embezzling money.
4. The document needed some additional elements: a title page, an abstract, and a reference page.
5. This journal article needs to include some specific information (name of article, name of journal, volume number, and page number) in the reference page.
6. Most research shows that the Gilded Age was from 1875 to 1914.
7. The war presidents, Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, will always be remembered for their bravery, while some presidents—Polk, Harding, and Hoover—will not be remembered as easily.
8. It seems that some students do not know how to incorporate research into their documents, or even find reliable research for that matter, because they have not been thoroughly taught how to do that.
9. The defendant \_\_\_\_\_ decided to plead guilty to get a less severe sentence.
10. I know that the theatre is open between the hours of 3 and 6, but the show does not start till between 7 or 8.



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11. “I will always be here to help you,” he smirked vindictively as Carol rolled her eyes.
12. Karen felt so overwhelmed that she started to cry—even sob.
13. Some documentation styles use page numbers to indicate where cited information came from, namely, APA.
14. The thesis statement, topic sentences, and organization, all need to be looked at thoroughly in the document.
15. Cassandra was not really paying attention when Glenn was making the statement, “You need to be more careful with how much you spend.”

## Answers

1. The siblings—Carl, Dirk, and Ashleigh—want to go to the water park today instead of tomorrow.
2. The less Bryce thought about his situation, the more he calmed down—even relaxed a little.
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9. The defendant ----- decided to plead guilty to get a less severe sentence.
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14. The thesis statement, topic sentences, and organization—all need to be looked at thoroughly in the document.
15. Cassandra was not really paying attention when Glenn was making the statement—“You need to be more careful with how much you spend.”



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