

Hyphens, En Dashes, and Em Dashes: Differences, Similarities, and Uses

At this stage in your academic career, you've likely encountered the hyphen, the em dash, and the en dash in your reading. These punctuation marks look similar—often colloquially being referred to as “long lines” or “short lines” in writing—but they are all used differently. This handout will explain the differences in usage along with models so you can use them confidently in your own composition.

Hyphens

Hyphens are always used to connect two separate word elements to form a compound word. Word elements include standard English words, prefixes, suffixes, single letters, and numbers.

Examples of Hyphen Usage

The following examples will clarify situations in which to use hyphens.

1. Join two or more independent words to turn them into a single adjective before a noun.

Examples

one-way street
well-known author

2. Join three or more independent words to turn them into a complex compound word.

Examples

daughter-in-law
editor-in-chief
over-the-counter

3. Write out the last two place values (in the ten and one columns) of a compound number.

Examples

forty-six
one hundred sixty-three
three thousand eight hundred twenty-one

4. Avoid confusion between similar-sounding words or stop two or more identical letters from being placed next to each other.

Examples

re-sign a petition (instead of *resign* from a job)
semi-independent
shell-like

5. Attach the prefixes ex-, self-, and all-.

Examples

ex-husband
self-assured
all-knowing

6. Attach the suffix -elect.

Examples

mayor-elect
vice president-elect
governor-elect

7. Attach any prefix to a capitalized word.

Examples

pre-Babylonian times
mid-September

8. Attach singular letters to words or letters to numbers.

Examples

t-ball
t-shirt
post-90s

Cautionary Note

A hyphen is not a dash! Hyphens cannot set off phrases or clauses, nor should they have spaces on either side of them.

En Dashes

The en dash is longer than a hyphen, but shorter than an em dash (—). It is mainly used between dates to mark a span of time. However, if you have a two-word adjective phrase that must be connected to a noun, an en dash is used instead of a hyphen to create a variant of the compound adjective. When an en dash is inserted, it should not have spaces on either side.

Examples of En Dash Usage

1. Specify time ranges.

Example

World War II (1939–1945) triggered significant changes in the balance of power worldwide.

2. Join two-word adjective phrases to a single noun.

Examples

Academy Award–winning actor
heavy metal–esque sound

Em Dashes

The em dash is the longest line among these marks of punctuation (—). Em dashes are most often used in pairs to call a reader’s attention to the material they set off, making words, phrases, or clauses particularly dramatic or emotional. Alternatively, pairs of em dashes are used to mark off additional information that elaborates on a sentence’s details but might not be essential to understanding the sentence. If you place material within em dashes, you are *emphasizing* that part of the sentence.

Spacing around an em dash is a contentious topic, and many style guides often give conflicting advice. Whether you choose to include spaces around your em dashes or not, make sure you stay consistent.

Examples of Em Dash Usage

1. Introduce (and emphasize) more detail at the end of a sentence without using a colon or semicolon.

Example

The speaker forced members of the audience to confront something that they never wanted to acknowledge—their own prejudices.

2. Introduce (and emphasize) a detail in the middle of a sentence.

Example

Julius Caesar—the first Roman Emperor—ruled until his untimely death in 44 BCE.

3. Emphasize a list already separated by commas.

Example

Multiple languages are spoken in Canada—English, French, and Native languages.

4. Mark a sudden change in a sentence's tone.

Example

The Assyrian Empire's brutality allowed for the rapid growth of their realm—but it ultimately brought their downfall.

Cautionary Note

One single em dash can be used to mark a break in a sentence in place of a semicolon or colon. This usage can be viewed as informal and conversational; as such, it should be used sparingly or not be used at all in academic papers.

Quick Usage Guideline

Em dashes are longer (—), so they are used between phrases or clauses (groups of words). Hyphens are shorter (-), so they are only used between prefixes and words to make compound words such as *self-esteem*. Of these three marks of punctuation, the en dash is used the least frequently.

Hyphen Activity

Insert hyphens to form compound words wherever necessary.

1. Her mother in law would be staying in the other bedroom.
2. The beautiful gold artifact dated back to the pre Columbian era.
3. The Student Council had to solve several inter related issues.
4. The family purchased twenty four cans of paint for their house.

Dashes Activity

Insert either en dashes or em dashes to make each sentence grammatically correct.

1. Her husband's claim that he was too tired to take out the trash a weak excuse if she ever heard one was one item on his long list of grievances.
2. She was excited to go to the concert until she learned that her ex was also going.
3. He insisted on a Middle Ages themed birthday party.
4. After 40 years of work, Alex was proud to say that he was a self-made man a title that his parents would have been proud of if they had been alive.

Hyphen Activity Answer Key

1. Her mother-in-law would be staying in the other bedroom.
2. The beautiful gold artifact dated back to the pre-Columbian era.
3. The Student Council had to solve several inter-related issues.
4. The family purchased twenty-four cans of paint for their house.

Dashes Activity Answer Key

1. Her husband's claim that he was too tired to take out the trash—a weak excuse if she ever heard one—was one item on his long list of grievances.
2. She was excited to go to the concert—until she learned that her ex was also going.
3. He insisted on a Middle Ages–themed birthday party.
4. After 40 years of work, Alex was proud to say that he was a self-made man—a title that his parents would have been proud of if they had been alive.

References

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2010. Print.