

Blog Post (Grammarly)

Snippets

- Dashes are horizontal lines that float between two words within a text. They can show a connection between two things or replace more commonly used punctuation.
- Dashes emphasize information, show breaks or changes in thought, and connect related ideas in a sentence. Writers often use dashes instead of commas, periods, or parentheses.
- There are three kinds of dashes: en dash, em dash, and double hyphen. The em dash and en dash appear frequently. While the double hyphen is found within some texts, its use is not as common as the en and em dash.
- Em dashes and en dashes each have different functions. You are likely more familiar with the en dash, which is shorter and frequently used to show numerical ranges or join words together. The em dash is longer and generally used to note a break, provide drama, or give an example.
- Writers use the en dash like this: “To pass the class, Sally needs to score between 80–90% on the exam.” In contrast, writers use the em dash like this: “Alex needs to pass chemistry—a very difficult class—to graduate this semester.”

Introduction

In English writing, shorter is often better, but complex thoughts may require longer sentences with multiple clauses. This is where the en dash and em dash are useful. A dash is a horizontal line within a text, longer than a hyphen, used to indicate a range or pause and separate groups of words. There are three types of dashes: em dash, en dash, and double hyphen. In this post, we'll explore their uses and differences.

Here's a tip: Want to make sure your writing shines? Grammarly can check your spelling and save you from grammar and punctuation mistakes. It even proofreads your text, so your work is polished wherever you write.

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What is a dash?

A dash is a line within text, positioned between words or characters in the middle of a line, unlike an underscore, which sits at the bottom. Dashes help join words, numbers, or ideas, enhancing readability as an alternative to commas, periods, or parentheses. There are three main types—em dash, en dash, and double hyphen—each differing in length and usage.

- En dash: The en dash (–) is of medium width and is used to show ranges, connect places, join compound adjectives, and show relationships.
- Em dash: The em dash (—) is slightly longer than the en dash and is used to signify a break, add additional information, introduce a concept, express dialogue, and replace other punctuation.
- Double hyphen: The double hyphen (--) features two individual hyphens side by side and has the same functions as an en dash.

Hyphen vs. Dashes

You may have noticed we haven't mentioned the traditional hyphen (-) because it's not considered a dash. Unlike dashes, which separate parts of a sentence, hyphens join words together. They are the smallest of the characters covered here and serve distinct purposes, like joining prefixes ending in vowels with root words (e.g., "co-founder") or linking words in phrases, such as "mother-in-law."

When to use a dash

The time to use a dash is determined by the situation the writer is trying to describe. The writer may use an en dash to show ranges, connect places, join compound adjectives, and show relationships. In contrast, em dashes may signify a break, add additional information, introduce a concept, better express dialogue, and replace other punctuation.

Em dashes help make complex, descriptive sentences easier to make sense of. Here is a sentence that is correct but hard to understand:

"The chef, who, despite the chaotic, bustling nature of the kitchen, and the numerous interruptions from servers, managed to prepare, plate, and serve, without delay, each dish, carefully ensuring that the ingredients, which were sourced locally, fresh, and organic, were highlighted in every meal."

This sentence is difficult because the comma simultaneously fulfills several unique purposes. Understanding the writer's true meaning is difficult without reading the sentence several times. Here's that same sentences with dashes replacing some of the commas:

“The chef—who, despite the chaotic and bustling kitchen, and frequent interruptions from servers—managed to prepare, plate, and serve each dish without delay, carefully ensuring that the ingredients—locally sourced, fresh, and organic—were highlighted in every meal.”

What is an en dash?

En dashes (–) are punctuation marks bigger than a hyphen (-) and smaller than an em dash (—). Despite their visual similarities, the en dash functions separately from its cousins. They are used to show a relationship between words, numbers, and more, including:

- Showing ranges: En dashes can be used to present a range of numbers, including dates, percentages, or dates (EXP: 60–86%)
- Connecting places: Writers sometimes use en dashes to illustrate a journey from one place to another. (EXP: An SFO–LAX flight)
- Joining compound adjectives: En dashes can be used in compound adjectives to show a connection or relationship, especially when one part of the compound is already a compound phrase or a multi-word concept. (EXP: The New York–based company)
- Showing relationships: The en dash highlights a relationship or connection, often where the two terms are independent entities connected in a specific way. (EXP: The teacher–student relationship)

It’s important to note that the double hyphen (--) is considered a dash rather than a hyphen, as it performs the same job as the en dash.

When to use an en dash

As shown above, the en dash has various uses that provide specific benefits to the writer. Here is a more in-depth look.

En dash indicating spans or ranges

The en dash is often used to indicate a period or a range of numbers. In this context, the dash should be interpreted as “to” or “through.” Consider the examples below:

- Reading assignments: “The teacher assigned pages 101–181 for tonight’s reading material.”
- Time windows: “The scheduled window for the cable installation is 1–3 p.m.”
- Multi-year events: “The San Francisco 49ers won more games in the 2021–2022 season than in the previous season.”

Connecting Places

An en dash connects places in a text by visually linking them under a shared idea, making it clearer and more concise than words like “to” or “and.” Examples include:

- Travel arrangements: Writers can use a phrase such as “the Los Angeles–San

Francisco flight) to describe a well-traveled route.

- Describing regions: Sometimes, en dashes are used to describe a region that doesn't have its own name. This is evident in terms such as "the California–Baja California border area."
- Comparison: The en dash may also be used to compare things. For example, one could state that "the East–West economic rivalry is the most important in the United States."

En dash indicating a connection

The en dash may also indicate a connection between two words, reducing the possibility of confusion for the reader. This is evident in the following examples:

- The North–South divide: By linking the two geographical regions, the reader understands the relationship is well established.
- The post–Cold War era: When paired with a known event, the dash illustrates that the event is directly associated with a cultural reference.
- The father–son relationship: Similar to the previous two examples, the en dash clarifies that this is an established relationship.

En dashes and compound adjectives

Writers may also use en dashes to join compound adjectives. Compound adjectives feature two separate adjectives that have a unique meaning while modifying a noun. Here are a few Examples:

- Full–time: "Full-time" describes an individual's work status by describing their work schedule.

- Fast–paced: This term implies a pace of movement that may be overwhelming.

You may also use a compound adjective with a proper noun comprising two or more words instead of hyphenating the appropriate noun.

EXP: The Nobel Prize–winning author will be reading from her book at the library tonight.

Finally, you can use an en dash in a complex compound adjective when one or both elements are already hyphenated. However, it's also acceptable to use hyphens in these cases—just make sure to be consistent throughout your writing.

- With an en dash: The pro-choice–anti-abortion argument is always a heated one.
- Without an en dash: The pro-choice-anti-abortion argument is always a heated one.

What is an em dash?

The em dash (—) is the longest of the dashes. Unlike the en dash, the em dash usually replaces other punctuation marks and doesn't serve a unique function. That being said, the em dash has a wide variety of use cases, such as:

- Signifying a break: One of the most common uses of the em dash occurs when it is used to convey a break in thought, often due to hesitation or a change of subject. In this

situation, it likely replaces the comma. (EXP: "I was about to tell you something important—but never mind.")

- Adding additional information: The em dash can note non-essential information that still adds important context. This is generally in place of parentheses. (EXP: "Her latest novel—a thrilling mystery set in Venice—has received rave reviews.")
- Adding emphasis: Another common use of the em dash occurs when it provides additional drama through emphasis, often replacing the ellipses. (EXP: "Winning that award—it changed her life.")
- Creating a list: The em dash can also signify to the reader that the writer is about to provide a list, usually instead of a comma or a colon. (EXP: "We packed everything—tents, food, and clothes—for the trip.")

The em dash, while not unique in function, is useful for breaking up sentences to improve readability. Frequent punctuation, like commas, can sometimes clutter text, making it harder to understand. An em dash clarifies the writer's intention.

When to use an em dash

Unlike the en dash, using the em dash is largely at the writer's discretion. However, there are a variety of instances in which it is beneficial. Here is some more detailed information on when that may be.

Using an em dash to set off parenthetical information

Parentheses provide additional that isn't essential to the surrounding sentence. However, they can sometimes clutter the text and alter the intended meaning. In these situations, writers may be better served using an em dash. Em dashes allow the writer to interject without the pause that the reader perceives when they encounter parentheses.

- With parentheses: After a split second of hesitation, the second baseman leaped for the ball (or, rather, limped for it).
- With the em dash: After a split second of hesitation, the second baseman leaped for the ball—or, rather, limped for it.

Using an em dash to set off appositives that contain commas

A comma has the potential to "set off" an appositive, making the text easier to read. An appositive noun provides additional information and context to the noun that comes after. For Example:

- EXP: The dog, Handsome Bob, is a very good boy."

In this sentence, the appositive is "the dog," which communicates the species of the individual that is a good boy. If the comma is overused, writers may consider replacing some (the first and

last) with an em dash.

- With commas: "The committee discussed several key issues, budget constraints, staffing needs, and project deadlines, before making a decision."
- With an em dash: "The committee discussed several key issues—budget constraints, staffing needs, project deadlines—before making a decision."

Using an em dash to bring focus to a list

Similarly, em dashes can also notify the reader when a list begins and ends, making it clear what is and is not included.

- With commas: "The garden features a variety of flowers, roses, tulips, daisies, and sunflowers, each adding color and beauty to the landscape."

In the above sentence, it is somewhat unclear whether the word "flower" is part of the list or the final word before it. The alternative is slightly clearer:

- With an em dash: "The garden features a variety of flowers—roses, tulips, daisies, and sunflowers—each adding color and beauty to the landscape."

Using an em dash to mark sharp turns in thought

One of the central difficulties of writing is conveying the full weight of what the writer wants to communicate. As you've seen, using the colons, commas, or ellipsis may sometimes inhibit that. Therefore, writers hoping to express sharp turns in thought or dramatic flare may look to the em dash instead.

- EXP: "I was planning to go for a run—but the rain changed my mind."
- EXP: "I thought I would enjoy the movie—it turned out to be quite disappointing."
- EXP: "She was excited about the trip—until she realized she had forgotten her Passport."

Common mistakes to avoid when using dashes

While dashes are useful, they should be used sparingly, with commas, colons, and parentheses as the default. Overusing or misusing dashes lessens their impact and can hinder readability. Next, we'll explore common mistakes in dash usage.

Using dashes inconsistently

Dashes are optional and enhance readability, offering no unique function beyond other punctuation. If used, they should appear consistently throughout, similar to the Oxford comma. Using dashes instead of hyphens

Hyphens link parts of a word, like "well-known," while dashes show a break in thought or separate sentence elements. The en dash (–) often gets confused with the hyphen (-) due to

their similar size and appearance.

Using dashes instead of other punctuation

Dashes are most impactful when used only in important moments. They are not interchangeable for a comma or colon. Further, when a writer neglects other punctuation instead of a dash, it may have the opposite of its intended effect: a more confusing piece of writing.

Adding unnecessary space with dashes

In most writing styles, spaces are not used on either side of the dash. There are several reasons for this. First and foremost is clarity. Adding space disrupts the visual rhythm, making the text harder to understand. The reader may also confuse the dash for a hyphen.

Using dashes to introduce direct quotations

Most standards advise against using a dash to introduce a quotation; colons are preferred, especially for longer quotes. Dashes can make sentences harder to read and feel informal, which may affect the tone, particularly in academic writing.

Using dashes instead of words

Using dashes instead of words is generally incorrect because it can obscure meaning, as prepositions are essential for showing relationships between nouns. Here's an example:

- EXP: "She wanted to go to the beach—it was raining."

This sentence would be clearer if it used "but" or "although." The current wording leaves the reader uncertain about the completeness of the thought and the reason for wanting to go to the beach. Here's what the same sentence containing a preposition instead of a dash:

- EXP: "She wanted to go to the beach, but it was raining"

In this version, the writer's intent is easier to understand. We understand that the character wants to go to the beach despite the rain.

Conclusion

Dashes can detract from clarity if misused, especially when other punctuation would work better—they're the seasoning, not the steak. However, they enhance readability and bring new life into your writing if used well.

FAQ

When should you use dashes?

Dashes should only be used when you want to convey drama, make a text easier to read, or if

another punctuation mark is overused.

What's the difference between an en dash and an em dash?

The en dash shows a relationship between words and numbers. In contrast, the em dash emphasizes or separates parts of a sentence, indicating breaks or interruptions in thought.

What's the difference between a dash and a hyphen?

While dashes generally show relationships between words within a sentence, hyphens show relationships within a singular word. For example:

- With a hyphen: "Alex was nervous about encountering their ex-dogwalker at the park."
- With a dash: "Alex stated that the party was supposed to run from 6–8 PM."

What is the double hyphen used for?

The double hyphen performs all of the same functions as the en dash and has no additional uses. It is often used in lieu of a dash as some keyboards do not feature an en dash key.

How to type en dashes and em dashes

On Windows, press the Alt key followed by 0151 for an em dash or 0150 for an en dash (you need a numeric keypad). On Mac, press the Opt key followed by Shift + - for an em dash or just - for an en dash