

Hyphens, En dashes, & Em dashes

Hyphen -	En Dash –	Em Dash —
used to connect compound words	shows a range	sets thoughts or ideas apart in a sentence
deep-fried absent-minded	March–May 2011–2023	She had three sons— Reuben, Sam, and Philip.

Hyphen (-)

- Hyphens are used in coequal nouns, compound adjectives, and some compound nouns. They are also used to hyphenate compound words together when a prefix or suffix is added. They cannot set off phrases or clauses, nor should they have spaces on either side of them.

Coequal Noun

- Uses a hyphen when a word has two nouns that function equally in meaning.
 - Examples: writer-illustrator, singer-songwriter, animator-illustrator-videographer

Compound Adjective

- A compound adjective is a single adjective that is made of multiple words.
 - Examples: world-class, fast-acting

Compound Noun

- A compound noun is a noun that is made of multiple words. Not all compound nouns are hyphenated but there are some exceptions.
 - Examples: great-granddaughter, student-athlete, president-elect
- When compound modifiers come after a noun, they are not hyphenated:
 - Example: The peanuts were chocolate covered.
 - Example: The author was well known.

When should I use hyphens?

- **Join two or more words that precede a noun and act as one descriptive term (compound adjective)**
 - Examples: well-known pediatrician, one-way street
- **Separate two colors**
 - Examples: red–orange glow, blue-green

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When should I use hyphens?

- **Join three or more independent words to turn them into a complex compound word.**
 - Examples: son-in-law, editor-in-chief, over-the-counter
- **With compound numbers**
 - Examples: thirty-three, Our much-loved teacher was forty-two years old
- **Avoid confusion or an awkward combination of letters**
 - Example 1: re-sign a petition (vs. resign from a job)
 - Example 2: semi-independent (but semiconscious)
- **Attach the prefixes ex-, self-, and all-**
 - Examples: ex-wife, self-assured, all-inclusive
- **When combining a prefix and a capitalized word**
 - Examples: mid-October, pre-Ottoman times
- **Attach singular letters to words or letters to numbers**
 - Examples: T-shirt, post-80s

En dash (–)

- The en dash can be used to connect a prefix of a suffix to a proper noun that is more than one word. It can be used to indicate time ranges, create compound adjectives, or show a connection. Do not put any spaces before or after the en dash. Can be read as "to" or "through."

When should I use en dash?

- **Specify time ranges & values**
 - Examples: the years 1939–1945, volumes 7–10
- **Indicate a connection or contest**
 - Examples: Tokyo–Osaka train, a French–Canadian conference, the Iran–Iraq War
 - Example: The Perth–Dubai–Boston flight takes more than a day.
 - Example: There is a north–south railway in the same area as the highway that runs east–west.
- Whereas a hyphen conveys unity, an en dash conveys separateness: “a French-Canadian conference” = a gathering of French Canadians; “a French–Canadian conference” = an event involving France and Canada.

Hyphens, En dashes, & Em dashes

- **Create compound adjectives when at least one of the terms contains two or more words**
 - She is a National Book Award–winning novelist.
 - They were a bunch of prep school–educated snobs.
 - It was just one of many changes in this post–New Deal era.

When should I not use an en dash?

- **If you introduce a span or range with words such as *from* or *between*, do not use the en dash.**
 - Incorrect: She served as secretary of state from 2000–2003.
 - Correct: She served as secretary of state from 2000 to 2003.

Em Dash (—)

- Em dashes are used when an idea is being interrupted, when clarification is needed, when elaboration is needed, or when items are being listed in a sentence. Depending on the context, the em dash can take the place of commas, parentheses, or colons—in each case to slightly different effect. Do not put spaces before or after an em dash.
- 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.

When should I use em dash?

- **When you are interrupting the main idea of a sentence. (adds elaboration & clarification)**
 - *interruption at end of a sentence → single em dash*
 - Example: I want to be a landscape photographer and have my work featured on the cover of National Geographic—even though my parents want me to go to medical school.
 - Example: The speaker forced members of the audience to confront something that they never wanted to acknowledge—their own prejudices.
 - *interruption in middle a of sentence → em dashes before and after the interruption*
 - Example: My brother—who got his medical degree as a foot doctor—told me to pursue my dreams.
 - Example: Julius Caesar—the first Roman Emperor—ruled until his untimely death in 44 BCE
- **Emphasize a list already separated by commas.**
 - Example: The soft-serve ice cream stand offered all the usual flavors—vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and swirl.
 - Example: Multiple languages are spoken in Canada—English, French, and Native languages.

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When should I use em dash?

- **In place of a comma to enhance readability.**
 - Example: And yet, when the car was finally delivered—nearly three months after it was ordered—she decided she no longer wanted it, leaving the dealer with an oddly equipped car that would be difficult to sell.
- **In place of a colon or semicolon to emphasize the conclusion of your sentence. The dash is less formal than the colon.**
 - Example 1: After months of deliberation, the jurors reached a unanimous verdict—guilty.
 - Example 2: The white sand, the warm water, the sparkling sun—this is what brought them to Fiji.
 - Example Semicolon: Medieval students undertaking higher education learned the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.
 - Example em dash: Medieval students undertaking higher education learned the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.
- **In place of a pair of parentheses. When dashes are used in place of parentheses, surrounding punctuation should be omitted.**
 - Example Parentheses: Upon discovering the errors (all 124 of them), the publisher immediately recalled the books.
 - Example em dashes: Upon discovering the errors—all 124 of them—the publisher immediately recalled the books.
- **When used in place of parentheses at the end of a sentence, only a single dash is used.**
 - Example Parentheses: After three weeks on set, the cast was fed up with his direction (or, rather, lack of direction).
 - Example em dashes: After three weeks on set, the cast was fed up with his direction—or, rather, lack of direction.

Two em dashes can be used to indicate missing portions of a word, whether unknown or intentionally omitted.

- Example 1: Mr. J—— testified that the defendant yelled, “Die, a——,” before pulling the trigger.
- Example 2: From the faded and water-damaged note, we made out only this: “Was ne——y going to m—— K——, but now ——t.”

When an entire word is missing, either two or three em dashes can be used. Whichever length you choose, use it consistently throughout your document. Surrounding punctuation should be placed as usual.

- Example: The juvenile defendant, ——, was arraigned yesterday.



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References

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