

quicktips

HYPHENS & DASHES

Problem

Many writers do not differentiate between hyphens (-) and dashes (– or —), since the marks look similar. Misuse of hyphens and dashes can obscure a writer's meaning, especially if a hyphen is used in place of a dash, or can make the writing look visually cluttered.

Solutions

REMEMBER THAT HYPHENS (-) ARE USED TO COMBINE WORDS. Use hyphens...

- **when writing out numbers from 21 to 99.**

Incorrect: Fifty six

Correct: Fifty-six

- **to combine the words in a compound adjective coming *before* the noun it modifies.**

Incorrect: This eighteenth century manuscript is interesting.

Correct: This eighteenth-century manuscript is interesting.

Correct: I found this manuscript from the eighteenth century to be interesting.

Incorrect: Lev Vygotsky studied the intellectual development of three year old children.

Correct: Lev Vygotsky studied the intellectual development of three-year-old children.

Correct: Lev Vygotsky studied the intellectual development of children who were three years old.

Correct: It would be difficult to be the parent of very young triplets: I can't imagine having three year-old children!

- **with the prefixes *all-*, *ex-*, and *self-* and with the suffix *-elect*.**

Incorrect: Doug runs into his exwife at the grocery store all the time.

Correct: Doug runs into his ex-wife at the grocery store all the time.

Incorrect: That sounds like a self serving reason for volunteering.

Correct: That sounds like a self-serving reason for volunteering.

Incorrect: The president elect will be inaugurated in January.

Correct: The president-elect will be inaugurated in January.

In Mac and Windows systems, make a hyphen by pressing the *minus* key. For hyphens, you can use the one at the top of the keyboard, or you can use the one on the number pad.

REMEMBER THAT EN-DASHES (–) HAVE THREE SPECIFIC USES.

En-dashes (–) are used (1) in place of a preposition to show a range of values, (2) to indicate relationships or connections, or (3) in rare cases, to clarify connections between certain compounds.

Use en-dashes...

- **to show a range of dates, times, or values**

For the 2012–13 school year, Student Writing Support in Nicholson is open Mondays–

Thursdays 9–4:30 and Fridays 9–2:15.

University of Minnesota Graduate Assistants rejected unionization by a 1,854–1,142 vote.

- **to show a relationship or connection**

My O'Hare–LaGuardia flight was delayed.

I desperately want tickets for the Gopher–Badger game.

- **to create an attributive compound when or more of its parts is an open (non-hyphenated) compound. This is a rare and specialized use of the en-dash.**

Confusing: Several journals welcome writing center-based research.

(Do the journals welcome people to write about center-based research?)

Clearer: Several journals welcome writing center-based research.

(Here, it is clear that the journals welcome research about writing centers.)

Confusing: I'm interested in studying the public education-charter school controversy.

(What is a public education-charter?)

Clearer: I'm interested in studying the public education-charter school controversy.

(Here, it is evident that the writer is studying the controversy over two concepts that are typically expressed as open compounds: public education and charter schools.)

To make an en-dash on a **Mac**, press two keys: *option+minus*.

To make an en-dash in **Windows**, press two keys: *control+minus* on the number pad.

REMEMBER THAT EM-DASHES (—) ARE USED IN PLACE OF OTHER PUNCTUATION TO SET OFF INFORMATION THAT DESERVES EMPHASIS.

Em-dashes (—), often known simply as dashes, get their name from typography: an em-dash is about the width of the letter “m.” (Similarly, an en-dash is about the width of the letter “n.”)

Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers (2011, p. 288) suggest three uses for em-dashes:

- **on both sides of material that deserves emphasis in the *middle* of a sentence, instead of parentheses or commas.**

Incorrect: Tom, who has never been lucky—won the jackpot last night.

Incorrect: Tom—who has never been lucky, won the jackpot last night.

Correct: Tom—who has never been lucky—won the jackpot last night.

- **on both sides of a list in the *middle* of a sentence when that list contains commas.**

Confusing: Louie stormed into the room and took four items off the desk, a pen, a paper clip, and two sheets of paper, before leaving in a hurry.

Clearer: Louie stormed into the room and took four items off the desk—a pen, a paper clip, and two sheets of paper—before leaving in a hurry.

- **before “a list, a restatement, an amplification, or a striking shift in tone or thought” at the *end* of a sentence.**

In their 6–0 loss to the White Sox, the Minnesota Twins revealed three major weak spots—pitching, hitting, and fielding.

Student-athletes are prepared to be excellent college writers because of their high degree of coachability—persistence, self-discipline, and receptiveness to feedback are all assets for developing writers.

Every spring, Minnesotans are full of hope for warmer weather—until the inevitable late-March blizzard arrives to crush our spirits.

To make an em-dash on a **Mac**, press three keys: *option+shift+minus*.

To make an em-dash in **Windows**, press three keys: *control+alt+minus* on the number pad.

For more information

Hacker, D., & Sommers, N. (2011). *A writer's reference* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.

The Chicago Manual of Style. (2010). Hyphens and dashes compared. In *Punctuation*. Retrieved from http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/16/ch06/ch06_sec075.html