



# Hyphens and Dashes

## Hyphens:

- Main purpose is to glue words together.
  - They notify the reader that two or more elements in a sentence are linked.
  - Writers also use them to add clarity
- **NEVER** use interchangeably with dashes and **NEVER** leave spaces around a hyphen.

## Dashes:

- Main purpose is to add emphasis, indicate an interruption or abrupt change in thought.
  - Is not interchangeable with other punctuation marks.
  - There are two kinds of dashes: Em dash, and En dash.



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# Hyphens

## Hyphens Between Words

### Rule 1

- Generally, hyphenate two or more words when they come before a noun they modify and act as a single idea. This is called a **compound adjective**.

### Examples:

- an off-campus apartment
- state-of-the-art design

**NOTE:** When a **compound adjective** follows a noun, a hyphen may or may not be necessary.

### Example:

- The apartment is off campus.

**NOTE:** There are some established **compound adjectives** that will always be hyphenated.

### Examples:

- well-known
- English-speaking
- part-time
- state-of-the-art
- well-educated
- narrow-minded
- forward-thinking
- ...and more.



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### Rule 2a

- a hyphen is frequently required when forming original compound verbs for vivid writing, humor, or special situations.

#### Examples:

- The slacker video-gamed his way through life.
- Queen Victoria throne-sat for six decades.

### Rule 2b

- When writing out new, original, or unusual compound nouns, writers should hyphenate to avoid confusion.

#### Examples:

- I changed my diet and became a *no-meater*.

*No-meater* would be confusing without the hyphen.

- The slacker was a *video gamer*.

*Video gamer* is clear without a hyphen, even though some writers would prefer to hyphenate.

**NOTE: Writers should consult a dictionary or go online to find other compound words that need to be hyphenated. Some more include:**

- one-half
- merry-go-round
- daughter-in-law
- over-the-counter
- mass-produced
- well-being



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### Rule 3

- Adjectives ending in -ly should be hyphenated.

#### Examples:

- the friendly-looking dog
- a family-owned cafe

### Rule 4

- Hyphens are used to tell the ages of people and things. A handy rule, whether writing about years or months, or any other period of time, is to use hyphens unless the periods of time are written in plural form.

#### Examples:

#### **With hyphens:**

- We have a two-year-old.
- We have a three-year-old child.

#### **No hyphens:**

- The child is two years old. (Because *years* is plural.)

#### Exception:

- The child is one year old. (Or day, week, month, etc.)

**NOTE:** When hyphens are involved in expressing ages, two hyphens are required. Many writers forget the second hyphen.

#### **Incorrect:**

- We have a two-year old child.

Without the second hyphen, the sentence is about an “old child.”

### Rule 5

- Never hesitate to add a hyphen if it solves a possible problem.



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Examples:

**Confusing:** I have a few more important things to do.

**With Hyphens:** I have a few more-important things to do.

Without the hyphen, it's impossible to tell whether the sentence is about a few things that are *more important* or a few more things that are all *equally* important.

**Confusing:** He returned the stolen vehicle report.

**With Hyphens:** He returned the stolen-vehicle report.

With no hyphen we could only guess: was the *vehicle report* stolen, or was it a report on *stolen vehicles*?

Rule 6

- When using numbers, hyphenate spans or estimates of time, distance, or other quantities. Remember not to use spaces around hyphens.

Examples:

3:15-3:45 p.m.

1999-2000

300-325 people

Rule 7

- Hyphenate all compound numbers from *twenty-one* to *ninety-nine*

Examples:



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- thirty-two children
  - one thousand two hundred twenty-one dollars

#### Rule 8

- Hyphenate all spelled-out fractions

#### Example:

- more than two-thirds of registered voters

#### Rule 9

- Hyphenate most double last names.

#### Example:

- Sir Winthrop Heinz-Eakins will attend.

#### Rule 10

- As important as hyphens are to clear writing, they can become an annoyance if overused. Avoid adding hyphens when the meaning is clear. Many phrases are so familiar that they can go before a noun without risk of confusing the reader.

#### Examples:

- a high school senior
- a twentieth century throwback
- one hundred percent correct

#### Rule 11

- When in doubt, look it up. Some familiar phrases may require hyphens.



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## Hyphens with Prefixes and Suffixes

A **prefix** (a-, un-, de-, ab-, sub-, post-, anti-, etc.) is a letter or a set of letters placed before a **root** word. The word *prefix* itself contains the prefix *pre-*. Prefixes expand or change a word's meaning, sometimes radically: the prefixes a-, un-, and dis-, for example, change words into their opposites (e.g. political, **a**political; friendly, **un**friendly; honor, **dis**honor.)

### Rule 1

- Hyphenate prefixes when they come before proper nouns or proper adjectives.

Examples:

- trans-American
- mid-July

### Rule 2.

- For clarity, many writers hyphenate prefixes ending in a vowel when the root word begins with the same letter.

Examples:

- ultra-ambitious
- semi-invalid
- re-elect

### Rule 3

- Hyphenate all words beginning with the prefixes self-, ex- (i.e. former), and all-.

Examples:

- self-assured
- ex-mayor
- all-knowing



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**Rule 4**

- Use a hyphen with the prefix re- when omitting the hyphen would cause confusion with another word.

**No confusion:**

- Will she recover from her illness?
- The stamps have been reissued.

**Confusion:**

- I have re-covered the sofa twice.
- I must re-press the shirt.

**Rule 5**

- Writers often hyphenate prefixes when they feel a word might be distracting or confusing without the hyphen.

**Examples:**

- de-ice

Without the hyphen we get *deice*, which might stump a reader.

- co-worker

Without the hyphen we get *coworker*, which could be distracting because it now starts with *cow*.



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A **suffix** (-y, -er, -ism, -able, etc.) is a set of letters that follows a root word. Suffixes form new words or alter the original word to perform a different task. For example, the noun *scandal* can be made into the adjective *scandalous* by adding the suffix -ous. It becomes the verb *scandalize* by adding the suffix -ize.

#### Rule 1

- Suffixes are not usually hyphenated. Some exceptions -style, -elect, -free, -based.

#### Examples:

- Modernist-style paintings
- Mayor-elect Smith
- sugar-free soda
- oil-based sludge

#### Rule 2

- For clarity, writers often hyphenate when the last letter in the root word is the same as the first letter in the suffix.

#### Examples:

- graffiti-ism
- wiretap-proof

#### Rule 3

- Use discretion—and sometimes a dictionary—before deciding to place a hyphen before a suffix. But do not hesitate to hyphenate a rare usage if it avoids confusion.

#### Examples:

- the animal dance-athon



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- an eel-esque sea creature

**NOTE:** Although the preceding hyphens help clarify unusual terms, they are optional and might not be every writer's choice. Still, many readers would scratch their heads for a moment over *daceathon* and *eelesque*.

## Dashes

**Dashes**, like commas, semicolons, colons, ellipses, and parentheses, indicate added emphasis, an interruption, or an abrupt change of thought. Experienced writers know that these marks are not interchangeable.

Examples:

- You are the friend, the only friend, who offered to help me.
- You are the friend—the only friend—who offered to help me.
- I pay the bills; she has all the fun.
- I pay the bills—she has all the fun.
- I wish you would...oh never mind.
- I wish you would—oh never mind.

**NOTE:** The dashes only subtly changed the tone of the sentence.

Rule 1

- Words and phrases between dashes are not generally part of the subject.

Example:

- **Joe**—and his trusty mutt—**was** always welcome.

Rule 2



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- Dashes replace otherwise mandatory punctuation, such as the commas after *Iowa* and *2013* in the following examples:

**Without a dash:** The man from Ames, Iowa, arrived.

**With a dash:** The man—he was from Ames, Iowa—arrived.

**Without a dash:** The May 1, 2013 edition of the Ames Sentinel arrived in June.

**With a dash:** The Ames Sentinel—dated May 1, 2013—arrived in June.

### Rule 3

- Some writers and publishers prefer spaces around dashes.

Example:

- Joe – and his trusty mutt – was always welcome.

**NOTE:** There are two different kinds of dashes, the **Em Dash**, and the **En Dash**.

## Em Dash

This is the dash that was used all throughout the dash section of this packet. It is the longest dash, compared to a hyphen or an en dash. It can replace commas, parentheses, or colons, depending on the context of the sentence. It is best to limit the use of em dashes to two per sentence, to avoid confusion. Here are a couple more ways to use the em dash (dash) than previously stated.



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The em dash in place of a colon:

- The em dash can be used in place of a colon when you want to emphasize the conclusion of your sentence. The dash is less formal than the colon.

Examples:

- After months of deliberation, the jurors reached a unanimous verdict—guilty.
- The white sand, the warm water, the sparkling sun—this is what brought them to Hawaii.

Multiple em dashes:

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

Examples:

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

**NOTE:** 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.

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

Spaces with the em dash:



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- The em dash is typically used without spaces on either side, and that is the style used in this guide. Most newspapers, however, set the em dash off with a single space on each side.

Example:

- Most newspapers — and all that follow AP style — insert a space before and after the em dash.

Producing the em dash:

- Many modern word processors will automatically insert an em dash when you type a pair of hyphens. Otherwise, look for an “insert symbol” command. If you are using a typewriter, a pair of hyphens is the closest you can get to an em dash.

## En Dash

This dash is slightly longer than a hyphen but is still smaller than an em dash.

Unfortunately, there is no dedicated key on a keyboard for the en dash but there should be a means to insert one on most word processors. Below are the ways that the en dash differs from a hyphen or an em dash.

Span or range of numbers:

- The en dash is used to represent a span or range of numbers, dates, or time. There should be no space between the en dash and the adjacent material. Depending on the context, the en dash is read as “to” or “through.”



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Examples:

- The 2010–2011 season was our best yet.
- You will find this material in chapters 8–12.
- The professor holds office hours every Wednesday, 11:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m.

**NOTE:** If you introduce a span or range with words such as *from* or *between*, do not use the en dash.

**Correct:** She served as secretary of state from 1996 to 1999.

**Incorrect:** She served as secretary of state from 1996–1999.

**Correct:** The regime’s most oppressive treatment occurred between 1965 and 1970.

**Incorrect:** The regime’s most oppressive treatment occurred between 1965–1970.

Scores:

- The en dash is used to report scores or results of contests.

Examples:

- The president’s nominee was confirmed by the Senate, which voted 62–38 along party lines.
- UCLA beat USC 28–14 in the final game of the regular season.

Conflict or connection:

- The en dash can also be used between words to represent conflict, connection, or direction.

Examples”

- The liberal–conservative debate.



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- The Los Angeles–London flight.
  - There is a north–south railway in the same area as the highway that runs east–west.

#### Compound adjectives:

- When a compound adjective is formed with an element that is itself an open compound or hyphenated compound, some writers replace the customary hyphen with an en dash. This is an aesthetic choice more than anything. For more on the hyphenation of compound adjectives, see here.

#### Examples:

**Hyphen:** She is an award-winning novelist.

**En dash:** She is a National Book Award–winning novelist.

**Hyphen:** It was just one of many changes in this post-Clinton era.

**En dash:** It was just one of many changes in this post–New Deal era.

**Hyphen:** They were a bunch of college-educated snobs.

**En dash:** They were a bunch of prep school–educated snobs.

**Hyphen:** He submitted his manuscript to a print-only publisher.

**En dash:** He submitted his manuscript to an e-book–only publisher.



### Resources

The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation by Jane Straus

<http://www.thepunctuationguide.com/en-dash.html>

