

Using the DASH

When using punctuation in writing, one will need to make choices in regard to some small horizontal lines including the following:

{	Symbols for <u>Utility</u> Functions: Minus sign: [-] Minus or Hyphen key Underscore: [_] SHIFT key + hyphen/underscore key	}
{	Symbols for <u>Writing</u> Functions: Hyphen: [-] Hyphen or Minus Key En Dash: [–] CTRL key + minus key Em dash: [—] CTRL + ALT + minus key	}

Most writers already know that the minus sign is a math symbol and the underscore is used to underline a word, phrase, or sentence. Both are used for utility purposes.

Tips for Recognizing and Using the HYPHEN [-] in Writing

The **hyphen** is the shortest of the three forms of dashes and lines and is used in split words and compound words. Some **examples** are:

- ninety-nine
- mother-in-law
- handsome-looking man
- vice-president
- mid-winter

Tips for Recognizing and Using the EN DASH [–] in Writing

The **en dash** is about the same width as the letter N. The **four uses** for the **en dash** are:

1. To show a **range of numbers**: There will be 20–25 girls at the game.
2. To show a **period of time**: The meetings will be held from July 5–July 10.
3. To show **distance**: The flight from Los Angeles–Hawaii is long.
4. To show **game scores**: The home team won the game 20–10.

Tips for Recognizing and Using the EM DASH [—] in Writing

The **em dash** is about the same width as the letter M. It is used to indicate a range or pause. The **em dash** is used to indicate specific meaning, so writers use it more for **emphasis** rather than as an easy substitute for commas, colons, or parenthesis. Overusing dashes can break up the flow of writing; thus, the writing can become too choppy or even difficult to understand. Therefore, writers should not overuse the dash in formal or academic writing*. Businesses often use the dash in *advertising* materials to show emphasis in order to sell their products, but *advertising* materials are not considered formal writing.

***Em dashes** are not generally required by the rules of grammar and punctuation. The comma, parenthesis, colon, and semicolon are considered more formal than the dashes, something to keep in mind when writing for academic purposes.

Ten uses for the **em dash** are:

1. Dashes can be used singly, when the information to separate appears at the end of a sentence: Help me take the garbage to the curb—**right now**.
2. Dashes can be used in pairs, when the information falls in the middle of a sentence: I want you to help me—**now not later**—to take out the garbage.
3. A dash can occur after an introductory list: **Flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, icing**—we need to buy all of these ingredients to make the cake today.
4. Dashes can emphasize contrasts: She told him that she loved ice cream—**and absolutely hated raw onions**.
5. Dashes can emphasize definitions: Long ago women wore corsets—**close-fitting undergarments with tight laces around the torso**.
6. Dashes can emphasize items in a list or series: Hawaii attracts many tourists with its lovely characteristics—**white sand, warm water, and sparkling sun**.
7. Dashes can indicate a sudden break in thought: He lost his shorts in the ocean—**oh, what a sight to see**—and he was totally embarrassed.
8. Dashes can set off parenthetical information for emphasis: Everything that went wrong today—**from the flat tire to the lost keys**—I blame on the rainy weather.
9. Dashes can set off parenthetical information with commas for clarity: A professional appearance—**including a jacket, tie, and dress shoes**—would be best for the job interview.
10. Dashes can be used to set off appositives which contain commas: Mrs. Phillips—**the tall, skinny, and very picky 6th grade English teacher**—does not tolerate sloppy papers.

A FINAL NOTE about the **em dash**:

- The **em dash** is mostly used in **informal writing**, such as friendly letters, emails, journals, and copywriting for some business advertising.
- **Do not overuse the em dash in formal writing**, such as business letters, research papers, and articles.
- **A good rule to follow is to use parenthesis, commas, semicolons, and colons instead of em dashes in formal writing.**
- There should **never be spaces** before or after an **em dash**.

PRACTICE

Mark each pair of sentences either formal (F) or informal (I):

_____ 1. Mom needs four things at the store—butter, milk, flour, and bread.

_____ 2. Mom needs four things at the store: butter, milk, flour, and bread.

_____ 3. The house rule is simple: clean up after yourself.

_____ 4. The house rule is simple—clean up after yourself.

_____ 5. My sister loves chocolate; my brother loves vanilla.

_____ 6. My sister loves chocolate—my brother loves vanilla.

_____ 7. Tim got an “A” on his spelling test—therefore, he gets play time.

_____ 8. Tim got an “A” on his spelling test; therefore, he gets play time.

_____ 9. Please call my lawyer—Richard Jones—on Monday.

_____ 10. Please call my lawyer, Richard Jones, on Monday.

_____ 11. Please call my lawyer (Richard Jones) on Monday.

_____ 12. I was going to buy a—what did you say she wanted for her birthday?

_____ 13. Mom needs to talk to you—oh, please excuse me! I did not know you had company.

_____ 14. I’m having a great day at the zoo—hey! Is that a jaguar?

(Answers on back)

ANSWERS

1. I 2. F 3. F 4. I 5. F 6. I 7. I 8. F 9. I 10. F 11. F 12. I 13. I 14. I

(Break in thought is considered informal writing, as in fiction writing).