

dashes & hyphens

Dashes and hyphens are punctuation marks that serve distinct functions. Although they appear similar, they are not used interchangeably. This handout will help you learn the uses of em dashes, en dashes, and hyphens.

Em Dashes (—)

The em dash consists of a longer line, which is the length of the letter *m*. There are no spaces before or after the em dash. These dashes are used to indicate a break in the continuity of a sentence. Since emphasis is placed on the material after or inside the em dashes, it is best not to overuse them.

Parenthetical Thought (Midsentence)

The em dash marks a pause in thought or a parenthetical statement. In other words, it sets off an element from the main clause. Often, the parenthetical thought serves to clarify, explain, or provide an exception to the main clause.

Example: A colossal squid—previously thought to be a creature of legend—was recently caught by fishermen.

Parenthetical Thought (End of Sentence)

The em dash can also be used to set apart a parenthetical thought at the end of a sentence.

Example: The school embraces interdisciplinary learning—that is, students explore a theme or question through multiple academic disciplines.

Inserting an Em Dash

Recent versions of Microsoft Word will insert an em dash when you type two hyphens followed by another word. On a PC, you can manually insert an em dash by pressing Alt + Ctrl + Minus (on the numeric keypad). On a Mac, press Shift + Option + Minus (at the top of the keyboard).

En Dashes (–)

The en dash is so called because its length is the same as the letter *n*. It is shorter than an em dash and longer than a hyphen. Style guides differ in their recommendations regarding whether or not to use spaces before and after the en dash.

Indicating Ranges

The en dash is used to indicate a range, such as a range of numbers.

Example: the years 2000–2010

Example: 10 am–5 pm

Example: pages 26–30.

If you introduce a range or span of time with the words “from” or “between,” do not use the en dash. Write out “to,” “and,” or “through” instead.

Example: She attended the university **from** 2006 **to** 2010.

Showing Relationships

The en dash is also used between two words to show conflict, connection, separation, or direction.

Examples: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict the mother–daughter bond the blood–brain barrier

Inserting an En Dash

In recent versions of Microsoft Word, two consecutive hyphens with spaces on both sides are automatically converted to an en dash. On a PC, press Ctrl + Minus (on the numeric keypad). On a Mac, press Option + Minus (at the top of the keyboard).

Hyphens (-) and Numbers

A hyphen is a short line with no spaces before or after it. Insert one by simply pressing the hyphen key.

Numbers and Fractions

Hyphens may be used in numbers, including the spelled-out numbers twenty-one through ninety-nine, phone numbers, and compound adjectives with numbers in them.

Examples: forty-two 867-5309 32-inch TV

Hyphenate fractions in their adjective or adverb forms. However, do not hyphenate the fraction itself when the numerator is already hyphenated.

Hyphenated: one-third share two-fifths full

Not hyphenated: fifty-three and twenty-two one hundredths

Do not hyphenate when the fraction is treated as a noun.

Not hyphenated: three quarters of the year

Age

When describing someone’s age, hyphens are used only if the age is used as an adjective. “nineteen-year-old” is an adjective used to describe the noun “student.”

Example: a nineteen-year-old student

Note: Here, “nineteen-year-old” is an adjective used to describe the noun “student.”

However, when the age is not used as an adjective—in other words, if it does not appear directly in front of a noun—it is not hyphenated.

Example: The student is nineteen years old.

Hyphens (-) and Compound Words

Compound words are two or more words that are joined together. They are sometimes, but not always, hyphenated. If you are unsure whether or not to hyphenate a compound word, consult a dictionary.

General Principles

Use a hyphen in cases where a compound word might otherwise be misunderstood.

Hyphenated: Bob is a big-city worker.

Not hyphenated: Bob is a big city worker.

Note: In the first example, Bob works in a large city. In the second, Bob is a large person working for the city.

Hyphenate a compound adjective when it appears before the word it describes.

Hyphenated: I live in a **first-floor** apartment.

Do not hyphenate an adjective-noun combination when it appears after the word it describes.

Not hyphenated: My apartment is on the **first floor**.

If two or more compound adjectives have the same base, omit the base word in all but the last adjective, but keep the hyphen.

Example: **first-, second-,** and **third-year** students

Compound Adjectives

When two or more adjectives are combined into a single adjective to modify the same noun, they are often hyphenated. Keep in mind, however, that some compound adjectives are not hyphenated. Non-hyphenated compounds may either be open (separate) or closed (together).

Hyphenated: once-in-a-lifetime opportunity three-day weekend old-fashioned clothes

Not hyphenated (open): North American

Not hyphenated (closed): carefree handmade foolproof kindhearted

Adverb + Participle: Hyphenate compound adjectives made from adverbs and past or present participles.

Examples: a **well-read** woman **slow-moving** traffic

However, when the adverb in the compound ends in -ly, the compound should not be hyphenated.

Not hyphenated: a **beautifully decorated** room **widely admired** poet

Do not use a hyphen when the adverb in the compound is “very,” “most,” “least,” “more,” or “less.”

Not hyphenated: the **least known** option a **very troubling** issue

Noun + Participle: A compound adjective made from a noun and a past or present participle should also be hyphenated.

Examples: a **wind-powered** generator a **man-eating** dragon

Noun + Adjective: When combining a noun and an adjective, use a hyphen.

Examples: a family-friendly destination an open-book exam

Chemical Terms: When used as an adjective, chemical terms are not hyphenated.

Examples: carbon monoxide detector sodium chloride crystals

Compound Nouns

A compound noun consists of two words that, together, form a noun. Since there is no specific rule governing the hyphenation of compound nouns, some are hyphenated and some are not. If you are unsure about a particular word, consult a dictionary.

Examples: eye-opener eyewitness eye shadow

Sometimes the same compound noun may or may not be hyphenated.

Example: paper-clip paperclip paper clip

Prefixes and Suffixes

Most words with prefixes and suffixes are written as a single word. However, there are exceptions. If you are unsure, consult a dictionary.

Hyphenated: pro-environment meta-analysis anti-apartheid

Not hyphenated: proactive childlike postmodern

Hyphenate compounds in which the base word is a proper noun, a number, or an abbreviation.

Examples: pro-American post-1960s non-GMO

Always hyphenate compounds containing “self,” whether they are adjectives or nouns.

Examples: self-esteem self-assured

Always hyphenate compounds containing “ex.”

Examples: ex-president ex-wife

Hyphenate prefixed words that might be misunderstood because they look like a different word.

Example: re-form (form again, not “reform”)

Hyphenate words in which the prefix ends with the same vowel that begins the base word.

Examples: pre-elementary anti-intellectual

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