



STUDENT WRITING SUPPORT

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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:

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

- a. Incorrect: Tom, who has never been lucky—won the jackpot last night.
- b. Incorrect: Tom—who has never been lucky, won the jackpot last night.
- c. Correct: Tom—who has never been lucky—won the jackpot last night.

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

- a. 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.
- b. 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.

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

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