

Long Dashes

The em dash and the en dash

The long dash—depending on your tastes as a writer—is probably the most under-utilized and/or over-utilized punctuation mark. I myself am a serial abuser of this cool little writing tool. There was even some serious talk among grammarians at one time to replace the colon with the long dash, which is still a good idea in my view. There are two main types of long dash: the em dash which is twice the length of the en dash, which itself is twice as long as the single dash. [See my opening sentence where I use all three!]

The biggest problem is that few keyboards even have the em dash or en dash obviously available to use either of them quickly; therefore, it is necessary to use the hidden tricks in your word processor. In Microsoft Word, you simply type in two dashes and the em dash pops in after you finish typing in the next word and add a space. In Pages you need to go to edit/special characters and find the character for the different types of long dash. On an iPad, you simply hold down the dash key and some long dash options pop up.

It is up to you to figure out how to create the dashes in whatever program you use. All such a pain for such a nifty writing tool!

Here are a few of the nifty uses for the long (em) dash.

1. To Add Emphasis to a Parenthetical Element.

- Anything that can be enclosed in parentheses can also be enclosed within a pair of commas or enclosed within two long dashes. It all depends on how you want your reader to read that parenthetical element.
 - Here are the rules, or at least my rules:
 - A. **If you want to whisper use parentheses:** e.g. The new kid in the class (the one with the behavior issues) is in trouble again.
 - B. **If you want to shout or emphatically make a point, use double dashes:** e.g. The new kid in class—the one with the mega-behavior issues—is in trouble again!

- C. **If you want to simply add some added detail, use commas:** e.g. The new kid in class, who has some behavior issues, is in trouble again.

All of these are correct, but each of the examples signal the reader to read the sentences in different ways. The final choice is always up to the you as the writer. I will add though that using parentheses or double dashes too much is not a good idea. Too much emphasis (using two long dashes) too often makes for overwrought writing with too much drama; while too many parentheses seem secretive and over-important; while only using commas seems so well, dull. The bottom line is to choose what works best in your writing piece for the audience you are trying to engage. If it works, uses it.

2. **To Add a New Idea or Insight as a Tag Element to a Sentence:** at its core, a sentence is a thought fully expressed, but sometimes (and only sometimes) a sentence begs for that little bit of extra something, like adding a bit of hot sauce onto your burger. To do this, add the long dash to the end of your sentence, then give the sentence a bit more oomph and meaning by adding a word, phrase, or clause to do the trick!
- e.g. Learning how to use the long dash is a really, really cool thing — really!
 - e.g. Spending the summer on the remote shore of a clear lake is a good way for a writer to live — and probably a good way for any person to live.
3. **To Indicate a Range of Time, Score, or Region:** I almost always use the short en dash for this. I usually include a space before and after the dash (but sometimes I forget and no one has ever noticed or had the temerity to tell me.
- e.g. The best time for fishing for trout in New England is May — September.
 - We beat the blue team 16 — 12 in the final round of the tournament.
 - The great white sharks were seen all the way from Maryland — Maine this summer. [You could just as easily write “Maryland to Maine” :)]

4. To Attribute Work to a Specific Author: This is especially useful when including quotes in any writing piece, or when inserting an author's name under a poem or extended quote.

- .e.g. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation..." Henry David Thoreau
- *With dewdrops dripping,*
I wish somehow I could wash
this perishing world
Basho

I would not lose any sleep over whether or not to use an em dash or an en dash. Just try to be consistent with how and when you use them.