

What is a DASH?



WAIT! Aren't hyphens and dashes the same thing?

No! The dash (—) and the hyphen (-) are two different punctuation marks and they serve different purposes. Notice how a dash is slightly longer than a hyphen?

DASH (—)

Dashes are small lines (*though longer than a hyphen*) written in the middle of a line (*not as low down as an underscore*). They are used to add emphasis, indicate an interruption, or show an abrupt change of thought.

TO INCLUDE PARENTHETICAL ELEMENTS:

When we want to add extra information—or an aside—in a sentence, we can do so by using parentheses, commas or dashes:

For example: My father (who is here today) is smiling.
My father, who is here today, is smiling.
My father—who is here today—is smiling.

This is particularly useful when the aside contains internal punctuation (such as commas). Consider the difference between the following:

My children, John, James, Scott and Mary, have gone shopping.
My children—John, James, Scott and Mary—have gone shopping.

TO SHOW AN ABRUPT CHANGE OF THOUGHT:

We use dashes to represent an abrupt change of thought in a sentence, or a forceful pause.

For example: "I am meeting him at—Oh No! I am late!"
"This is important—Are you even listening?"

TO ADD INFORMATION AFTER A LIST:

When a sentence begins with a list and then ends with a clause (explaining the list), we can use a dash to connect them, and link the list to an idea.

For example: Peanuts, shellfish, gluten—she is allergic to them all.

A NOTE ON THE EM-DASH AND THE EN-DASH

When typing on a computer, there are two types of dashes: the em-dash and the en-dash. They are differentiated by length and, as their names suggest, the em-dash is the length of a typed 'm' and the en-dash is the length of a typed 'n'. (*NOTE: The hyphen is even shorter.*)

EM DASH: The em dash is used for all of the situations described above—it is the more commonly used dash.

EN DASH: The en dash is used to show spans of numbers or scores:

For example: The 2013-2014 season was the best for the team. They even ended with a 43-20 score against their rivals.

