

En Dashes and Em Dashes

[09/15/02] A number of you have written to ask us to explain the difference between the **hyphen**, the **em dash**, and the **en dash**.

Distinguishing among the Three

The hyphen is the shortest of the three and is used most commonly to combine words (compounds such as “well-being” and “advanced-level,” for example) and to separate numbers that are not inclusive (phone numbers and Social Security numbers, for example). On typewriter and computer keyboards, the hyphen appears on the bottom half of the key located on the top row between the “0” and the equals mark (=).

In many instances, correct hyphenation can be a complicated issue. We have addressed it partly in an earlier tip (go to the tip archive on this Web site and find the tip on hyphenated adjectives), and we will discuss it in greater detail in a future tip. Today, however, our focus is on the two kinds of dashes.

Remember, though, that when using the hyphen, the en dash, or the em dash, you should put no space either before or after them. The only exception is with a hanging hyphen (see, for example, the word “nineteenth” in the phrase “nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature”). By definition, a hanging hyphen will have a space after it but not before it.

The em dash is the mark of punctuation most of us think of when we hear the term “dash” in regard to a sentence. It is significantly longer than the hyphen. We use the em dash to create a strong break in the structure of a sentence. Dashes can be used in pairs like parentheses – that is, to enclose a word, or a phrase, or a clause – or they can be used alone to detach one end of a sentence from the main body. Dashes are particularly useful in a sentence that is long and complex or in one that has a number of commas within it.

When we confuse the em dash with the hyphen, we make a sentence virtually impossible to read. Notice the sentence containing dashes in the preceding paragraph. If we had used a hyphen in

place of each dash, it would seem as though we had hyphenated two pairs of words in the sentence: “parentheses-that” and “clause-or,” neither pair of which makes any sense.

The en dash is slightly longer than the hyphen but not as long as the em dash. (It is, in fact, the width of a typesetter’s letter “N,” whereas the em dash is the width of the letter “M” – thus their names.) The en dash means, quite simply, “through.” We use it most commonly to indicate inclusive dates and numbers: July 9–August 17; pp. 37–59.

Many people were not even aware of the distinction between the en dash and the em dash until the advent of word processors, when software programs enabled us to use marks of punctuation that once had been available only to professional printers.

Typing the En Dash and Em Dash

Our typewriter and computer keyboards lack individual keys that display either of the dashes. (The symbol above the hyphen is an underline, not a dash.) Before word processing, we had to type an em dash by typing two hyphens. Now, many word processing software programs will automatically turn those two hyphens into an em dash (if we correctly leave NO space before or after them).

We can also choose en and em dashes from a menu of symbols that do not appear on the keyboard. In Microsoft Word, for example, we can pull down the “Insert” window, click on “Symbol,” and go to the “normal text” window. The en and em dashes appear on the bottom row.

In any software program that handles text, the em dash can be typed on an enhanced keyboard as Alt + 0151 – that is, hold down the “alternate” key and type, using the numerical pad on the right side of the keyboard, the numbers 0151. The en dash can be typed as Alt + 0150.

TEST YOURSELF

Can you spot any errors in the use of the hyphen, the en dash, or the em dash in the following sentences?

1. The instructions were written on pages 33-47.
2. The conference will be held June 30 - July 2 on Hilton Head Island.
3. Juan had tried begging, bribing, and even demanding cooperation from his staff-all of whom were swamped with other work-before he gave up and wrote the report himself.
4. No one - not even the president of the company - realized the company would have to dissolve so quickly.

ANSWERS

1. The instructions were written on pages 33–47. (Use an en dash, not a hyphen, to indicate inclusive page numbers.)
2. The conference will be held June 30–July 2 on Hilton Head Island. (Use an en dash, not a hyphen, to indicate inclusive dates. Do not space before or after dashes.)
3. Juan tried begging, bribing, and even demanding cooperation from his staff – all of whom were swamped with other work – before he gave up and wrote the report himself. (Use em dashes, not hyphens, to indicate a break in thought.)
4. No one – not even the president of the company – realized the company would have to dissolve so quickly. (Use em dashes, not hyphens, to show a break in thought. Do not space before or after dashes.)

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