

Hyphens and dashes: how to use them

What do hyphens and dashes look like?

- this is a hyphen –
- this is an en dash –
- this is an em dash —

Although hyphens and dashes look similar, they have very different functions.

What does a hyphen do?

A hyphen is a punctuation mark that joins words (or parts of words) together. Hyphens are not interchangeable with dashes. There should be no spaces before or after a hyphen.

Hyphens are used:

- in written numbers: e.g. thirty-three, twenty-one
- in written fractions: e.g. two-thirds, three-fifths
- in compound modifiers: e.g. left-handed player, child-friendly restaurant, five-year-old girl
- in compound nouns: e.g. father-in-law, great-grandson, second-guess, double-cross

Note: a compound modifier is two or more words that are joined together to describe the noun that follows. A compound noun is a noun that combines two or more words.

What does a dash do?

A dash is a punctuation mark that is commonly used to show elements in a range, emphasise a phrase or indicate a non-essential phrase in a sentence. There are two kinds of dashes: en dashes (–) and em dashes (—).

What does an en dash do?

En dashes are used:

- to link numbers in a range (closed up): e.g. 1995–2002, Monday–Friday, 9.00–5.30
- between words that have equal weight: e.g. Dover–Calais crossing, New York–London flight
- instead of a colon to emphasise a phrase (spaced): e.g. There was only one thing she could do – run (more common in UK style)
- instead of parentheses to indicate a non-essential phrase (spaced): e.g. Her car – a red Ford Focus – was parked on the drive (more common in UK style)

What does an em dash do?

Em dashes are used:

- for sentence interruptions in fiction (closed up): e.g. 'Why did you—?'
- instead of a colon to emphasise a phrase (closed up): e.g. There was only one thing she could do—run (more common in US style)
- instead of parentheses to indicate a non-essential phrase (closed up): e.g. Her car—a red Ford Focus—was parked on the drive (more common in US style)

When not to use dashes

Dashes are considered to be informal punctuation, so if you are writing for business or education, use formal punctuation when emphasising a phrase or indicating a non-essential phrase in a sentence.

