

Hyphens

APSU Writing Center Handout

A hyphen (-) joins words together. It is used in coequal nouns, compound adjectives, certain compound nouns, and when attaching some prefixes or suffixes.

- Do not use a hyphen to set off phrases or clauses.
- Do not put spaces before or after a hyphen.

Coequal Nouns

Use a hyphen when two or more nouns function equally to describe the same person or thing.

- **Examples:** writer-illustrator, singer-songwriter, and animator-illustrator-videographer

Compound Adjectives

A compound adjective is made of two or more words that act together as a single adjective before a noun.

- **Examples:** world-class athlete, fast-acting medication, and one-way street

After the Noun

When the compound modifier comes after the noun, it is usually not hyphenated.

- **Example:** The peanuts were chocolate covered.
- **Example:** The author was well known.

Compound Nouns

A compound noun is made of two or more words that function as one noun.

- **Examples:** great-granddaughter, student-athlete, president-elect, and son-in-law

When Should I Use Hyphens?

1. Join Words Before a Noun (Compound Modifiers)

Examples: well-known pediatrician and a red-orange glow

2. With Compound Numbers (21–99)

Examples: thirty-three and forty-two years old

3. To Avoid Confusion

Example: re-sign a petition (vs. resign from a job)

Example: semi-independent (but semiconscious)

4. With Certain Prefixes

Attach a hyphen with:

- **Example:** ex- (ex-wife)
- **Example:** self- (self-assured)
- **Example:** all- (all-inclusive)

5. Before Capitalized Words

Use a hyphen when combining a prefix with a capitalized word.

- **Examples:** mid-October and pre-Ottoman times

6. With Letters and Numbers

Examples: T-shirt and post-80s

En dash (–)

The en dash (–) is slightly longer than a hyphen. Do not put spaces before or after it.

It is often read as “to,” “through,” or “and.”

When Should I Use an En Dash?

1. Time Ranges and Values

Examples: the years 1939–1945 and volumes 7–10

2. To Indicate Connection or Relationship

Examples: Tokyo–Osaka train and a French–Canadian conference

Hyphen vs. En Dash

French-Canadian conference = a gathering of French Canadians

- A hyphen shows unity.

French–Canadian conference = an event involving France and Canada

- An en dash shows connection between separate entities.

3. In Complex Compound Adjectives

Use an en dash when one part of the compound contains multiple words.

Examples: a National Book Award–winning novelist and prep school–educated students

When to not use an En Dash

Do not use an en dash if the range is introduced by words such as from or between.

- **Incorrect Example:** She served from 2000–2003.
- **Correct Example:** She served from 2000 to 2003.

Em Dash (—)

The em dash (—) is longer than both the hyphen and the en dash. Do not put spaces before or after it.

Em dashes can replace commas, parentheses, colons, or semicolons for emphasis or interruption.

When Should I Use an Em Dash?

1. To Show Interruption or Emphasis

Interruption at the End of a Sentence (Single Em Dash)

- **Example:** I want to be a landscape photographer—even though my parents want me to go to medical school.

Interruption in the Middle of a Sentence (Two Em Dashes)

- **Example:** My brother—who earned his medical degree as a podiatrist—told me to pursue my dreams.

2. To Emphasize a List

Example: The ice cream stand offered all the usual flavors—vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and swirl.

3. In Place of a Colon or Semicolon

The em dash is less formal than a colon.

- **Colon example:** Students learned the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.
- **Em dash example:** Students learned the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.

4. In Place of Parentheses

When replacing parentheses with em dashes, omit surrounding punctuation.

Parentheses: Upon discovering the errors (all 124 of them), the publisher recalled the books.

Em dashes: Upon discovering the errors—all 124 of them—the publisher recalled the books.

If the parenthetical information comes at the end of the sentence, use only one dash:

- **Example:** After three weeks on set, the cast was frustrated—perhaps even exhausted.

5. To Indicate Missing Letters or Words

Two em dashes can show missing or censored letters.

- **Example:** Mr. J—— testified in court.

If an entire word is missing, use two or three em dashes consistently throughout your document.

- **Example:** The juvenile defendant, ——, was arraigned yesterday.

References

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