

**APSU Writing Center**  
Hyphens

**Hyphen (-)**

- 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

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**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

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En dash

**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.

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Em Dash

**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.

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Em Dash

**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.



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### References

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Purdue Online Writing Lab. (n.d.). *Hyphen Use*. Purdue Online Writing Lab. [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/punctuation/hyphen\\_use.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/hyphen_use.html)

Ruth-Seminara, S. (2011). *Hyphens, En Dashes, and Em Dashes: Differences, Similarities, and Uses*. San José State University Writing Center. <https://sjsu.edu/writingcenter/docs/handouts/Hyphens%20Dashes.pdf>