

# The Use of Dashes

By

Victory Crayne

Copyright 2007

## Table of Contents

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| <b>Introduction.....</b>  | <b>1</b> |
| How to insert the dashes and the ellipsis using MS Word .....           | 2        |
| Recommended reference .....   | 2        |
| <b>Excerpt from <i>The Chicago Manual of Style</i> .....</b>            | <b>2</b> |
| Hyphens and Dashes.....   | 2        |
| <b>Why writers get confused over the em dash (with examples) .....</b>  | <b>7</b> |
| Inserting a break in a sentence.....                                    | 7        |
| Adding an afterthought.....   | 8        |
| Interrupted speech .....  | 8        |
| Excessive use of em dashes can be visually distracting to readers ..... | 9        |
| <b>Make your writing easy to read .....</b>                             | <b>9</b> |
| <b>Victory's services .....</b>   | <b>9</b> |

## Introduction

Many writers have difficulties with the proper use of dashes, including the hyphen, the en dash, and the em dash, shown here:

hyphen -

en dash –

em dash —

2-em dash ——

3-em dash ———

Using real world examples from writers I have worked with, I will show the use of all three, as well as some examples of the ellipsis (...). I covered the ellipsis in more detail in another article on dialogue, where it is often used.

## How to insert the dashes and the ellipsis using MS Word

### Hyphen -

Click the minus key on the numeric pad on the right.

### En dash –

Press CTRL+minus on the numeric pad.

### Em dash —

Press CTRL+ALT+minus on the numeric pad.

### Ellipsis ...

Press CTRL+ALT+period.

You will notice that the ellipsis appears as a single character. Do not use three periods in a row as a substitute for an ellipsis. By the way, the plural of ellipsis is ellipses.

## Recommended reference

For detailed studies of punctuation, I strongly recommend *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15<sup>th</sup> Edition*, ISBN 0-226-10403-6. The book costs US\$55 (in 2007), but I recommend the investment for all writers who are serious about getting published. This book is the major reference source for issues of style for publishers in America.

Ignore its guidelines at your own risk.

## Excerpt from *The Chicago Manual of Style*

The following paragraphs in this section are taken directly from *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15<sup>th</sup> Edition*, but with some reformatting to fit the styles of this article.

### Hyphens and Dashes

**6.80** *Hyphens and dashes compared.* Hyphens and the various dashes all have their specific appearance (shown below) and uses (discussed in the following paragraphs). The hyphen, the en dash, and the em dash are the most commonly used and must be typeset correctly; an en dash appearing where a hyphen is called for bespeaks editorial or typographic confusion. In typing, as opposed to typesetting, writers are advised (unless otherwise instructed by their editors or publishers) to use a single hyphen both for a

hyphen and for an en dash, two hyphens for an em dash, four hyphens for a 2-em dash, and six hyphens for a 3-em dash. The publisher will convert these to the appropriate forms. See 2.15–16, 2.89, 2.99.

hyphen -

en dash –

em dash —

2-em dash ——

3-em dash ———

## HYPHEN

**6.81** *Compounds.* The use of the hyphen in compound words and names and in word division is discussed in 5.92–93 and in chapter 7, especially 7.33–45 and table 7.1. See also 6.85.

**6.82** *To separate characters.* A hyphen is used to separate numbers that are not inclusive, such as telephone numbers, social security numbers, and ISBNs. It is also used in dialogue, in reference to American Sign Language (see 10.147, 10.149, 10.154), and elsewhere to separate letters when a word is spelled out.

1-800-621-2376 *or* (1-800) 621-2376

0-226-10389-7

"My name is Phyllis; that's p-h-y-l-l-i-s.

A proficient signer can fingerspell C-O-L-O-R-A-D-O in less than two seconds.

In URLs, careful distinction must be made between a hyphen (-), a tilde (~), and an underline ( \_ )

<http://www.rz.uni-karlsruhe.de/~szm/woerterbuch1.html>

[www.nitl.edu/univ\\_press](http://www.nitl.edu/univ_press)

E-mail addresses and URLs that include hyphens must be typeset with care; to avoid ambiguity, not only should no hyphen be added at line breaks, but no line breaks should be allowed to occur at existing hyphens. See 7.44.

## EN DASH

**6.83** *En dash as "to."* The principal use of the en dash is to connect numbers and, less often, words. In this use it signifies *up to and including* (or *through*).

For the sake of parallel construction the word *to*, never the en dash, should be used if the word *from* precedes the first element; similarly, *and*, never

the en dash, should be used if *between* precedes the first element. For more on dates and times, see 9.38, 9.43. For the slash, see 6.114.

Her college years, 1998–2002, were the happiest in her life.

For documentation and indexing, see chapters 16–18.

In Genesis 6:13–22 we find God's instructions to Noah.

Join us on Thursday, 11:30 a.m.–4:00 p.m., to celebrate the New Year.

The London–Paris train leaves at two o'clock.

I have blocked out December 2002–March 2003 to complete my manuscript.

Her articles appeared in *Postwar Journal* (3 November 1945–4 February 1946).

Green Bay beat Denver 31–24.

The legislature voted 101–13 to adopt the resolution.

*but*

She was in college from 1998 to 2002.

She published her articles between November 3, 1945, and February 4, 1946.

- 6.84** *With nothing following.* An en dash may be used by itself after a date to indicate that something (a publication or a person's life) is still going on. No space follows the en dash.

Professor Plato's survey (1999–) will cover the subject in the final volume.

Jane Doe (1950–); or Jane Doe (b. 1950)

- 6.85** *In place of a hyphen.* The en dash is used in place of a hyphen in a compound adjective when one of its elements is an open compound or when two or more of its elements are open compounds or hyphenated compounds (see 7.83). As illustrated by the first four examples below, en dashes separate the main elements of the new compounds more clearly than hyphens would ("hospital" versus "nursing home," "post" versus "World War II," etc.), thus preventing ambiguity. In the last two examples, however, to have used en dashes between "non" and "English" and between "user" and "designed" would merely have created an awkward asymmetry; the meaning is clear with hyphens.

the post–World War II years

a hospital–nursing home connection

a nursing home–home care policy

a quasi-public–quasi-judicial body (or, better, a judicial body that is quasi-public and quasi-judicial)

*but*

non-English-speaking peoples

a wheelchair-user-designed environment (or, better, an environment designed for wheelchair users)

(Abbreviations for compounds are treated as single words, so a hyphen, not an en dash, is used in such phrases as "U.S.-Canadian relations.")

- 6.86** *Other uses.* The en dash is sometimes used as a minus sign, but minus signs and en dashes are distinct characters. Since both the characters themselves and the spacing around them may differ when typeset, it is best to use the correct character, especially in mathematical copy. In electronic documents, substituting any character for another may hinder searches. In certain scientific disciplines, the en dash may sometimes be used where one would normally expect a hyphen (see *Scientific Style and Format*; bibliog. 1.1). In some instances an en dash is used to link a city name to the name of a university that has more than one campus.

the University of Wisconsin–Madison

the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

## EM DASH

- 6.87** *Versatility and frequency of use.* The em dash, often simply called the dash, is the most commonly used and most versatile of the dashes. To avoid confusion, no sentence should contain more than two em dashes; if more than two elements need to be set off, use parentheses (see 6.98).
- 6.88** *Amplifying or explaining.* An em dash or a pair of em dashes sets off an amplifying or explanatory element. (Commas, parentheses, or a colon may perform a similar function.)

It was a revival of the most potent image in modern democracy—the revolutionary idea.

The influence of three impressionists—Monet, Sisley, and Degas—is obvious in her work

The chancellor—he had been awake half the night—came down in an angry mood.

She outlined the strategy—a strategy that would, she hoped, secure the peace.

My friends—that is, my former friends—ganged up on me.

- 6.89** *Separating subject from pronoun.* An em dash may be used to separate a subject, or a series of subjects, from a pronoun that introduces the main

clause. Note its use after a series separated by semicolons in the last example.

Consensus—that was the will-o'-the-wisp he doggedly pursued.

Broken promises, petty rivalries, and false rumors—such were the obstacles he encountered.

Darkness, thunder, a sudden scream—nothing alarmed the child.

Kingston, who first conceived the idea; Barber, who organized the fundraising campaign; and West, who conducted the investigation—those were the women most responsible for the movement's early success.

- 6.90** *Indicating sudden breaks.* An em dash or a pair of em dashes may indicate a sudden break in thought or sentence structure or an interruption in dialogue. (Ellipsis points may also serve this purpose; see 11.45.)

"Will he—can he—obtain the necessary signatures?" asked Mill.

"Well, I don't know," I began tentatively. "I thought I might—"

"Might what?" she demanded.

If the break belongs to the surrounding sentence rather than to the quoted material, the em dashes must appear outside the quotation marks.

"Someday he's going to hit one of those long shots, and"—his voice turned huffy—"I won't be there to see it."

- 6.91** *Used in place of, or with, a comma.* If the context calls for an em dash where a comma would ordinarily separate a dependent clause from an independent clause, the comma should be omitted. But if an em dash is used at the end of quoted material to indicate an interruption, a comma should be used before the words that identify the speaker.

Because the data had not been fully analyzed—the reason for this will be discussed later—the publication of the report was delayed.

*but*

"I assure you, we shall never—," Sylvia began, but Mark cut her short.

- 6.92** *With other punctuation.* A question mark or an exclamation point—but never a comma, a colon, or a semicolon, and rarely a period (see 16.65)—may precede an em dash.

All at once Richardson—can he have been out of his mind?—shook his fist in the ambassador's face.

Only if—heaven forbid!—you lose your passport should you call home.

**6.93** *Used in place of quotation marks.* Em dashes are occasionally used instead of quotation marks (mainly by French writers) to set off dialogue. Each speech starts a new paragraph.

—Will he obtain the necessary signatures?

—Of course he will!

**6.94** *In an index.* For the use of em dashes in an index, see 18.27.

## **2-EM AND 3-EM DASHES**

**6.95** *2-em dash.* A 2-em dash represents a missing word or part of a word, either omitted to disguise a name (or occasionally an expletive) or else missing or illegible in quoted or reprinted material. When a whole word is missing, space appears on both sides of the dash. When only part of a word is missing, no space appears between the dash and the existing part (or parts) of the word; when the dash represents the end of a word, a normal word space follows it. See also 7.66, 11.66-67.

"The region gives its —— to the language spoken there.

Admiral N—— and Lady R—— were among the guests.

David H——h [Hirsch?] voted aye.

(Although a 2-em dash sometimes represents material to be supplied, it should not be confused with a blank line to be filled in; a blank in a form should appear thus \_\_\_\_)

**6.96** *3-em dash.* In a bibliography a 3-em dash followed by a period represents the same author or editor named in the preceding entry (see 16.84–89, 16.103–5).

———. *The Last Dinosaur Book*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

This ends the material from *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

## **Why writers get confused over the em dash (with examples)**

### **Inserting a break in a sentence**

Many times, writers use an em dash (—) when they wish to insert an idea in the middle of a sentence, perhaps to explain something or add emphasis. For example, SS wrote:

The Elders only stated it was gold in color with a red spot, resting on a patch of hay inside—what they assumed to be—a barn.

This use of the em dash is grammatically correct. However, if it is overdone and too many such dashes appear on the same page, the reader can tire of having his train of thought interrupted so often. In addition, the em dash is a strong punctuation mark that can become visually distracting if too many appear on the same page.

It is better to rewrite those sentences so the em dash is not necessary. In that example, deleting the dash works very well:

**The Elders only stated it was gold in color with a red spot, resting on a patch of hay inside what they assumed to be a barn.**

### **Adding an afterthought**

Sometimes a writer will add a thought, perhaps an afterthought, to a sentence with an em dash. For examples, SS wrote:

**However, my footsteps in life continue forward in a new direction to resolve other countless mysteries—within the dark passages of my mind.**

Replacing the em dash with a space would serve the same purpose and is less disruptive to the train of thought of the reader. In such cases, it appears the writer is directing how the reader shall read the sentence in order to bring special emphasis to it. This is often an attempt by the writer to direct how the reader shall think and is evidence of the writer writing from his point of view and not the reader's.

But in the following example, that same author had a valid point to make with emphasis when he wrote:

**My emotions intensified as I delved deep—and met a presence so foul that it consumed my thoughts to find its source.**

### **Interrupted speech**

A writer may use an em dash to indicate an interruption in dialogue, such as when TC wrote:

**Christopher fingered another pebble and tossed it to the Aegean. "But, are you sure we can make it? My mother said it's not possible in such a small—"**

**"What?!" Alexi turned sharply and cut him off. "You told your mother?"**

SS wrote:

**"Baron, how—"**

**"The King was right. It's time I come clean," Oreus blurted out.**

These uses of the em dash are grammatically correct. However, if the writer has used too many em dashes on the same page, it would be more pleasing to the eye of the reader if he had used an ellipsis instead, such as in:

“Baron, how...”

“The King was right. It’s time I come clean,” Oreus blurted out.

But for the sake of consistency for the reader, if the writer has used the em dash consistently in his manuscript to indicate an interruption in speech, then it is better for the reader if he continues to use it for that purpose throughout his manuscript.

### **Excessive use of em dashes can be visually distracting to readers**

When a writer falls in love with the em dash, his writing can become peppered with it. If the em dash is used too many times on the same page, the eye of the reader is drawn to it and this can disrupt his train of thought.

Remember, good writing is invisible to the reader as he is drawn into the story being told. But when a writer attempts too often to control how the reader reads the words on the page, the reader can resent this control, resulting in irritation on his part. This results in loss of his enjoyment of the tale.

## **Make your writing easy to read**

I often tell my clients: Don't make your readers struggle to understand either the reading or the story. Make the story easy to read and easy to follow and you'll have more repeat buyers.

And that means more money in your pocket.

## **Victory’s services**

**Victory Crayne** is an independent professional fiction editor and writing coach/mentor.

“I help those who write novels get closer to achieving their dreams.”

GET PROFESSIONAL FEEDBACK ON YOUR NOVEL! Learn from a pro.

"Feedback from Victory will improve not just one novel, but EVERY novel you write."

Visit <http://www.crayne.com> or send an email to [victory@crayne.com](mailto:victory@crayne.com).