

Hyphens And Dashes: What's the Difference?

Great, you need a hyphen—or do you need a dash?

Hyphens (-) are used a lot, sometimes properly, sometimes not. This is the punctuation mark made by hitting that "-" key on the top row of your keyboard beside "0." You use a hyphen for forming some compound words and noun phrases, but usually hyphens appear in words when they're adjectives.

Something that happens in real life is a real-life circumstance.

Hyphens are also used in hyphenating words when you use the "Hyphenation..." tool in such programs as Microsoft Word to split words up so the text takes less space on a page.

Dashes actually have two types, the more common being the em-dash (—). MS Word lets you put one in your writing as a special character in the Insert menu under "Symbol..." or by holding down Alt, Ctrl, and the "-" from your numeric keypad. If a substitute is needed, two hyphens might be used, without a space in-between (--). (Users of Apple computers can in general hold down Option, Shift, and the regular hyphen key to get a dash. In MS Word for Apple, you can also use the other ways listed above, substituting the Apple key for Ctrl and the Option key for Alt.)

All the uses of an em-dash can be summed up as demonstrations of emphasis or speed. In general, an em-dash should be used instead of a hyphen or en-dash if the punctuation is needed for the sentence as a whole to make sense. If commas, colons, semicolons, or parentheses don't lend enough emphasis to your shift in thought, list, or side note, replace them with dashes. But make sure to use dashes sparingly; you don't want to lessen their emphasis through overuse.

Regular em-dash: It was a hot day—at least, hotter than most in that town—and many people were miserable.
Alternative em-dash: It was a hot day--at least, hotter than most in that town--and many people were miserable.

Rules for the spacing around em-dashes vary; the *Chicago Manual of Style* states that no spaces should surround an em-dash, whereas the *AP Stylebook* says a space should be on each side.

Chicago example: Carrots, potatoes, and onions—all of these belong in beef stew.
AP example: Carrots, potatoes, and onions — all of these belong in beef stew.

En-dashes (–) aren't as common as em-dashes and are usually replaced by a single hyphen (-). Like the em-dash, you can insert an em-dash in MS Word as a special character from "Symbol..." in the Insert menu. You can also hold down Ctrl with the "-" from your numeric keypad. (Apple users can in general hold down Option and the regular hyphen key to produce an en-dash. In MS Word for Apple, you can also use the other ways listed above, substituting the Apple key for Ctrl.)

En-dashes are used in ranges of numbers when *from* or *between* do not precede them, and they are also used as minus signs.

Regular en-dash: Mark Twain was the penname for Samuel Clemens (1835–1910).
Alternative en-dash: Mark Twain was the penname for Samuel Clemens (1835-1910).

When omitting a word or part of one in a quote, something else should be used: the 2-en dash. This is two en-dashes in a row (—) or four hyphens (----).

Regular 2-en dash: The quote "War is H—" is well-known.
Alternative 2-en dash: The quote "War is H----" is well-known.

All three punctuation marks have their distinct usages. We advise you to stick to the hyphen method of each dash (one hyphen for the en-dash, two for the em-dash, and four for the 2-en dash) unless you're told directly to use the actual mark or unless you absolutely *know* that it will appear correctly to the receiver. Even in e-mails, the en-dash and em-dash characters don't always convert correctly, and "Ñ" or other weird characters don't convey the same meaning.