Punctuation 6: How to Use Dashes and Parentheses

GO36.1
Directed Learning Activity—How to Use Dashes and Parentheses

Description: Dashes and parentheses can be particularly confusing because, at times, they are interchangeable. This Directed Learning Activity (DLA) will teach you the different uses of dashes and parentheses. It will also compare their respective uses to each other, as well as to the uses of other punctuation marks. Hopefully, after completing the lesson, you will have a better understanding of both these punctuation marks and be able to confidently use them in your writing.

Prior Knowledge: It would be helpful to know the definition of appositive. An appositive renames a nearby noun—usually the one in front of it. For example: “The actor Brad Pitt has starred in many movies.” In this sentence, Brad Pitt is an appositive because it names the actor.

Step One: Introducing Dashes
There are four types of dashes in English: the en dash (–), the em dash (—), the 2-em dash (— —), and the 3-em dash (—— —). As you can see, they differ in length. The en dash is supposed to be as wide as the letter n; the em dash, the letter m. The most commonly used dash is the em dash, so that is the one that we will be focusing on in this DLA.

Dashes are often confused with the hyphen (-), which—as you’ll learn in Step Three—is a shorter punctuation mark that is used for different purposes. If you want to know more about hyphens, the Success Center recommends completing the DLA “How to Use Hyphens.”

Step Two: Assessing What You Already Know About Dashes
On the lines below, explain what you already know about dashes. Don’t look ahead or use other sources of information. Try and write something down, but if you feel like you don’t know anything about dashes, then write that you don’t know.

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Step Three: Understanding How Dashes Can Be Used
Many people think dashes and hyphens are the same, but dashes are used within sentences (usually to emphasize separation of ideas or lists), while hyphens are used to connect compound words and some prefixes.

The dash can be used to replace parentheses, semicolons, colons, or commas. Generally, using the dash makes the writing style more informal—as if you were writing to an old friend. Dashes add emphasis—a bit of dash, you might say—and often make sentences stronger or more
interesting than conjunctions or other punctuation marks. A dash interrupts the flow of the sentence and tells the reader to get ready for some important or dramatic statement. Dashes are not generally used in formal documents. Compare the two sets of sentences below. All of them are grammatically correct, but notice how the dashes make the second part of the third sentence in each set much stronger.

Always buckle your seat belt because it’s the law.
Always buckle your seat belt; it’s the law.
Always buckle your seat belt—it’s the law.

I gave you my last $20, so don’t waste it.
I gave you my last $20; don’t waste it.
I gave you my last $20—don’t waste it.

In this DLA, you will learn about four uses of dashes: **to separate appositives that contain commas**; to set off extra information that you want to emphasize; to summarize, explain, or illustrate a thought; and **to signal a list, a restatement, an amplification, or an abrupt shift in tone or thought**. Carefully read the explanations and examples below before attempting these techniques yourself in the practice exercises.

1. **Use a dash to separate appositives that contain commas.**

   My best friends—Mike, Kevin, Brian, and Paul—are coming to my party.

   Using commas here would be too confusing:

   My best friends, Mike, Kevin, Brian, and Paul, are coming to my party.

   The other choice you have is to use parentheses. Just remember that parentheses de-emphasize the material between them, while dashes emphasize it.

   My best friends (Mike, Kevin, Brian, and Paul) are coming to my party.

2. **Use a dash to set off extra information that you want to emphasize.**

   Everything that could go wrong—from sleeping through her alarm to getting a speeding ticket—did go wrong.

   The brother—the one who is always in trouble—was arrested again last night.

   The information between the dashes could easily be omitted, and it wouldn’t change the essential meaning of the sentence. Notice that the dashes (because of the white space they create around the list) make the material more prominent. You could use other punctuation marks in these two sentences, but dashes are more interesting and add spunk.
3. Use a dash to summarize, explain, or illustrate a thought.

I love Beaver Creek—a small ski area in Colorado with long, challenging runs.

The Sixth Amendment—the right to a speedy and public trial—ensures that an accused criminal will not sit in prison for an unreasonable amount of time before his trial.

The third law of motion—the law of reciprocal actions—explains why that contraption with five metal balls found in many medical offices keeps bouncing back and forth.

4. Use a dash to signal a list, a restatement, an amplification, or an abrupt shift in tone or thought.

I need three items from the store—dog food, chili, and cheddar cheese.
[In formal writing, you would probably want to use a colon here.]

Red, white, and blue—those are the American colors.
[With dashes, you can put the list at the front of a sentence.]

Please call my agent—Jessica Cohen—about hiring me.
[This is a restatement. Again, parentheses or commas would work just fine here instead of the dashes.]

You are the friend—the only friend—who offered to help me.
[The only friend is an amplification.]

I pay the bills—she has all the fun.
[A semicolon would be used here in formal writing.]

Ken took a few steps back, came running full speed, kicked a mighty kick—and missed the ball. [Here’s an abrupt shift in tone.]

Step Four: Understanding How Dashes Can Be Overused

Be careful not to overuse dashes. Some writing teachers say dashes indicate sloppy writing and they disrupt the flow too much. These teachers suggest good writers prefer commas, colons, or parentheses. However, dashes can be effective if you use them correctly and in moderation. Look at the example below:

I used to think Sheffield was quite an ordinary place to live—until I found out about its haunted houses. You can take a City Ghost Tour—for the fright of your life! The most haunted house in Sheffield is on Abbey Street—on top of Mars Hill near the outdoor arena—which dates back to 1462.

This passage has way too many dashes. One would be quite enough. Read the passage again and note the changes.
I used to think Sheffield was quite an ordinary place to live. That is, until I found out about its haunted houses! You can take a City Ghost Tour—for the fright of your life! The most haunted house in Sheffield is on Abbey Street (on top of Mars Hill near the outdoor arena), which dates back to 1462.

Dashes are kind of like exclamation marks. They can be a little annoying if you use too many of them. Again, the key to using dashes is moderation.

**Step Five: Typing Dashes in *Microsoft Word***

At this point, you might ask: “How can I use dashes—in moderation, or otherwise—if I don’t know how to type them?”

Fair enough. While we at Success Center cannot anticipate exactly what type of computer and word-processing program you have at home, we can tell that here—where we have PCs running *Microsoft Word*—you can create the four types of dashes by pressing these keys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Dash</th>
<th>What It Looks Like</th>
<th>How to Type It</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>en dash</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Between two words, insert a space, then two hyphens, then another space. <em>Microsoft Word</em> will automatically replace the two hyphens with an en dash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>em dash</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Between two words, insert two hyphens but no spaces. <em>Word</em> will automatically replace the two hyphens with an em dash. As a shortcut on a PC, you can press Ctrl+Alt+NumPadMinus. (<em>NumPadMinus</em> is the minus sign on the number pad to the right of the keyboard.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-em dash</td>
<td>———</td>
<td>Type two em dashes together by pressing Ctrl+Alt+NumPadMinus; they will appear as a single line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-em dash</td>
<td>———</td>
<td>Type three em dashes together by pressing Ctrl+Alt+NumPadMinus; they will appear as a single line.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step Six: Editing for Dash Usage**

Now that you have learned the rules, it’s time to apply that knowledge to writing. When you write an essay, you must always edit for mistakes. That means critically looking at your
grammar and punctuation and correcting any mistakes you have made. Part of that process is deciding if other punctuation marks might be more effective. The practice exercises in Step Six are meant to help you learn how to edit for proper dash usage.

Look at the following sentences. Each sentence can take a dash or a pair of dashes. Determine where the dash(es) might go.

1. The idea that boys are smarter than girls is ridiculous even preposterous.

2. Love, patience, kindness, understanding these are traits that a good parent must possess.

3. It seems that some students do not know how to incorporate research into their documents or even find reliable research for that matter because they have not been thoroughly taught how to do it.

4. I wish you would oh, never mind.

5. Some small businesses will make it through this hard time most will not.

6. The twelve polar bears were large and I mean large!

7. Brendan's latest fling not to be confused with his permanent fling learned that she wasn't the only woman in his life.

8. Superior students notice that I said superior will not have to take the test.

9. All four of them Bob, Jeffrey, Jason, and Brett did well in college.

10. The man the one with his hand in the air looks desperate.

11. The professor was unwilling to change the due date even for a candy bar!

12. This is the end of our sentence or so we thought.

13. The less Bryce thought about his situation, the more he calmed down even relaxed a little.

14. The document needed some additional elements a title page, an abstract, and a reference page.

15. The student the one dressed in black, sitting in the corner let out a cry.

16. Laws now restrict the activities of one of the most cunning predators the telemarketer.

Step Seven: Assessing What You Already Know About Parentheses
On the lines below, explain what you already know about parentheses. Don’t look ahead or use other sources of information. Try and write something down, but if you feel like you don’t know anything about them, then write that you don’t know.

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______________________________________________________________________________  

______________________________________________________________________________  

Step Eight: Understanding How Parentheses Can Be Used

Parentheses are punctuation marks that enclose supplementary material (explanations, clarifications, or afterthoughts) that doesn’t fit into the flow of the text but that you still want to include. The information inside the parentheses is generally information that is interesting to know but does not change the meaning of a sentence in which it is included. Anything that can be removed from the sentence without altering its meaning can be enclosed in parentheses. Take a look at the following examples to get a better idea of what counts as extraneous material.

For the last five years (some say longer), the house on the hill has been haunted.
We read Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (one of my favorite stories) this semester.
He finally said (after taking five minutes to think) that he did not understand the question.
Those four boys (without doubt, the guilty ones) damaged my lawn several times.
The weights James was first able to move (not lift, mind you) were measured in ounces.

If the parenthetical element is a complete sentence but is included inside another sentence, do not capitalize the first word of the sentence (unless it is a proper noun) or put a period at the end of the sentence. If the parenthetical element is not a part of another sentence, do capitalize the first word and add the appropriate ending punctuation. Below are two sets of examples to help you see the difference.

Three of my four uncles served with honor in the war (the other was too young to enlist).
Like three of my four uncles (the other was too young), my father served with honor.
Three of my four uncles served with honor. (The other was too young to enlist.)

His dislike for poetry goes back to the fifth grade (his teacher asked him to read a difficult poem aloud) when he had an embarrassing experience in class.
His dislike for poetry goes back to the fifth grade when he had an embarrassing experience in class. (His teacher asked him to read a difficult poem aloud.)

Now, you will learn about five additional uses of parentheses: to enclose numbers or letters in a series, to indicate the plural of nouns, to indicate an acronym, to enclose dates,
and to **enclose citations**. Carefully read the explanations and examples below before attempting these techniques yourself in the practice exercises.

1. Use **parentheses to enclose numbers or letters in a series**.

   *Three elements of stories include (1) characters, (2) setting, and (3) plot.*

2. Use **parentheses to indicate the plural of nouns**.

   *In the following section of the exam, circle the error(s) in each of the sentences.*

3. Use **parentheses to indicate an acronym**.

   *President Eisenhower established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1958.*

   *The mission of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is to stop drunk driving completely.*

4. Use **parentheses to enclose dates**.

   *Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) is one of my favorite poets.*

5. Use **parentheses to enclose citations**.

   *As of December 2000, twenty countries were restricting use of cell phones in moving vehicles (Sundeen 8).*

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**Step Nine: Deciding Whether to Use Parentheses or Dashes**

Parentheses can be used in place of dashes, but when should they be? Think of parentheses as hiding information (de-emphasizing it) while dashes highlight information—emphasizing it. A dash is quite a dramatic punctuation mark. Notice the differences in these sentences. The parentheses downplay the material inside, while the dashes make it stand out.

*The tennis team (especially Jim) played great.*
*The tennis team—especially Jim—played great.*

*The tennis team (except for Matt) played great.*
*The tennis team—except for Matt—played great.*

*Erica looked beautiful (incredibly beautiful) in her prom gown.*
*Erica looked beautiful—incredibly beautiful—in her prom gown.*

*If you eat too much ice cream (as I’ve done today), you’ll get fat.*
*If you eat too much ice cream—as I’ve done today—you’ll get fat.*
Step Ten: Understanding How Parentheses Can Be Overused

One last word of warning: as with all things in life (including dashes), use parentheses only in moderation. Even the most tolerant of readers can become irritated by a set of parentheses every other word.

Step Eleven: Editing for Parentheses Usage

Now that you have learned the rules, it’s time to apply that knowledge to writing. When you write an essay, you must always edit for mistakes. That means critically looking at your grammar and punctuation and correcting any mistakes you have made. Part of that process is deciding if other punctuation marks might be more effective. The practice exercises in Step Eleven are meant to help you learn how to edit for proper parentheses usage.

Each of the sentences below needs parentheses. Decide where they should go and insert them.

1. We Anna, Michael, and I have decided to volunteer for four hours each week, somewhere in the community.

2. The song “Forever Young” Alphaville’s version, not Jay Z’s has been playing in my head for several hours now.

3. While walking down the street paying more attention to her music than to her feet, Catherine tripped over the curb and sprained her ankle.

4. The cat was sleeping did you expect anything different? and was shocked awake when the fire alarm went off.

5. Relative pronouns function as 1 subject, 2 direct objects, 3 prepositional complements, 4 possessive determiners, and 5 adverbials in English grammar.

6. Please review the report Exhibit A before today’s meeting.

7. Books marked IRMA Infrequently Requested Materials Area may be checked out.

8. The library the six-story building next to the student center is open 24 hours during finals week.

9. New students mostly freshmen but some transfer need information about available parking.

10. My daughter she goes to Illinois State plans to become a teacher.

11. I know the answer I think to the final question.

12. After taking her vital signs temperature, pulse, and blood pressure, the nurse made Becky as comfortable as possible.
13. Many cartoons have depicted the very real dangers of driving while distracted see Figure 1.

14. After six months, the group receiving medication had lost 4.6 kg about 10 pounds more than the control group.

15. Certain American car companies GM, Ford, and Chrysler are having financial problems because of the bad economy.
How to Use Dashes and Parentheses

Tutor Feedback:

_____ The student can explain the differences between dashes and parentheses and can tell when to use each one.

_____ The student demonstrates understanding of dash and parentheses rules by correctly punctuating the sentences in Step Six and Step Eleven, respectively.

Additional Comments: __________________________________________________________
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INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE

You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.