

# Hyphens and Dashes

When writing technical documentation, you must use hyphens and dashes correctly, or they may confuse your readers and your meaning. The proper use of each is explained below.

## Using Dashes

The dash, known as the "em dash" is equal to the width of an uppercase M. It signifies a break in thought. Use an em dash, with one space before and after, in the following situations:

### Between a Series of Appositives

Place an em dash before and after an appositive series.

**Example:** Three vital pieces of hardware — the keyboard, the system unit, and the monitor — are packed in the largest carton.

### To Set Off Parenthetical Phrases

When a parenthetical phrase deserves more emphasis than the use of parentheses implies, use em dash(es).

**Example:** Because the information needed for the project needs further development — the details will be presented later — the launch date has been postponed.

### In Lists

In an unnumbered (bulleted) list, you can use an em dash to separate an introductory word or phrase from its explanation.

**Example:** The word processing software features:

Automatic save — saves changes every two minutes

Automatic backup — creates a backup file when you exit

Automatic recall — tracks the last 20 transactions

## Using Hyphens

The hyphen, often used synonymously with the "en dash" is half the length of the em dash. Use the hyphen or en dash in the following situations:

### Between Interdependent Words

If two words, such as "computer-related" communicate a different meaning than one of the words in a sentence, they should be hyphenated. To decide when to hyphenate, try removing one of two seemingly interdependent words from your sentence. If your sentence no longer makes sense, add the hyphen.

### To Indicate a Range

Use a hyphen, without spaces before or after, to indicate a range, such as pages in a book, e.g., pages 16–24.

### For Negative Numbers and Numbers In Sets

A hyphen can also be used to mark the breaks in phone numbers, serial numbers, etc., and as a minus sign.

**Example:** Temperatures lower than -10 °C.

### In Certain Compound Words

The computer industry has developed unique terminology that has made it difficult to define exactly when and how words should be hyphenated to form computer-related terms.

## Em vs. En Dashes

For many technical writers, the basic dash and hyphen are not distinct enough. Technical writers and many desktop publishers, therefore, use two types of dashes, the em dash and en dash, instead of the dash (two hyphens) and the hyphen; they usually reserve the basic hyphen only for hyphenating words. Depending on where you work, your style guide and word processing software may require you to deliberately use these elements. To use em and en dashes, all you have to understand is that the em dash is like the dash, and the en dash is like the hyphen. Of course, their use is more precise; to understand all these specific uses, read on.

### Em Dash

The em dash is equal to the width of an uppercase M, or two hyphens.

Wordperfect, for example, can automatically create an em dash for you if you type two hyphens and press the space bar. Use an em dash, with no space before or after the dash, as follows:

- **With an appositive series,** place an em dash before and after an appositive series.

**Example:**

Three vital pieces of hardware—the keyboard, the system unit, and the monitor—are packed in the largest carton.

Use of dashes in the example above avoids any confusion that could be caused by using commas within the series and to set off the series from the rest of the sentence.

- **To set off parenthetical phrases.** When a parenthetical phrase deserves more emphasis than the use of parentheses implies, use em dash(es).

**Example:**

Because the information needed for the project needs further development—the details will be presented later—the launch date has been postponed.

### Dash (En Dash)

The en dash is half the length of the em dash, the same width as an uppercase N.

- **To indicate a range.** Use an en dash, without spaces before or after, to indicate a range, such as pages in a book, e.g., pages 16–24.
- **To indicate negative numbers.** A hyphen, which is shorter than an en dash, can also be used as a minus sign, e.g., temperatures lower than –10 °C.
- **In lists.** In an unnumbered (bulleted) list, you can use an en dash, without spaces, to separate an introductory word or phrase from its explanation.

**Example:**

The word processing software features:

Automatic save – Saves changes every two minutes

Automatic backup – Creates a backup file when you exit

Automatic recall – Tracks the last 20 transactions

