



Hyphens and Dashes

Did you know that dashes and hyphens are different types of punctuation and that there are different types of dashes for different uses? If not, getting to know these punctuation marks and their uses can greatly improve your writing.

Hyphens

Hyphens are the small dash you get when you click the key next to the zero on your keyboard, and they are used to **join compound words** such as “self-restraint.” **Numbers between twenty-one and ninety-nine** should also be hyphenated, and one should also hyphenate **compound modifiers that appear before their noun**, such as “super-friendly” in “super-friendly dog.” Hyphenating in this way allows the reader to decipher easily which of the words are modifiers and which is or are the noun being modified. **If you place your compound modifier after its noun, you need not hyphenate it** because the placement already allows the reader to recognize those words are modifiers: Her dog is super friendly. **If one of the words in your compound modifier is “very” or ends with “ly,” however, you need not hyphenate** because those two types of words obviously work as compound modifiers:

- She is a very smart girl
- He is an extremely gifted musician.

En Dashes

En dashes are about the size of an uppercase N and indicate ranges in time or distance, such as in the following:

- For homework, read pages 19–42.
- I’ll schedule you for a meeting from 4:30–5:00 p.m.

AutoFormat in Word makes typing an en dash rather easy. Simply leave a space on either side of the hyphen between the two elements you want to join with the en dash, and when you click the space bar after typing the second of those elements, the hyphen should expand into an en dash. Most style guides then recommend removing those spaces around the en dash. Thus, in the above example, I typed “19” and then left a space before typing a hyphen and leaving another space before typing “42.” When I pressed the space bar after the 2 in “42,” the hyphen expanded to an en dash. I then removed the spaces around it. In other words, to type an en dash use this formula: word-space-hyphen-space-word-space.

Em Dashes

The em dash (about the width of an uppercase M) is my favorite punctuation mark because it can be employed for a variety of uses, but its primary use is to act as super-comma. Generally speaking, parentheses indicate something is less important than the main text, and commas indicate something

is as important or part of the main text. **The em dash, on the other hand, signals something is more important than the main text or is deserving of special attention:**

- She brought only one pencil—albeit a brand-new one—to her written exam.
- His paper was full of errors—142 of them to be exact.

To type an em dash with AutoFormat in Word, simply type your first word, and then, without spaces, type two hyphens and then the second word. When you press the space bar after the second word, your two hyphens should join and expand into an em dash. Again, in other words, **follow this formula: word-hyphen-hyphen-word-space.**