

Hyphen (-), En Dash (–), and Em Dash (—)

The difference in length between a hyphen, an en dash, and an em dash may be small, but the difference in meaning is significant. This quick reference guide explains when and how to use each one correctly.

Hyphen -

The shortest of the three, **the hyphen joins two or more words to create a single idea:**

- Compound adjectives: *a high-quality product*
- Numbers/words: *twenty-one students*
- Some prefixes: *ex-girlfriend, self-aware, in-depth*

Hyphens were once used to split words at the end of a line in handwritten or typed text, but modern word processors now handle line breaks automatically.

En dash –

The en dash is used to show a range or a connection between things.

Think of the en dash as a replacement for *to* or *between*.

- Ranges: *pages 15–20, June–August, 9:00–11:30 a.m.*
- Connections (especially between places or people): *New York–Paris flight, Einstein–Bohr debate*

The en dash is often the least used of the three in academic writing, as many writers substitute a hyphen instead. However, some style guides (such as APA and MLA) *require* the en dash for page ranges and certain compound terms. For this reason, it is particularly important in citations and formal writing.

Em dash —

Em dashes add extra information or create a pause in a sentence.

- Add a break or interruption: *He said it was urgent — but I'm not so sure.*
- Add extra info: *The professor — who was late again — finally arrived.*

Em dashes are used similarly to commas or parentheses, but they attract more attention from the reader. Use them sparingly, as too many em dashes can make your writing feel choppy and hard to follow.

Em dash style differences:

US style

- Usually no spaces: *The findings—though preliminary—are promising.*

UK style and some publishers:

- Spaces on either side: *The findings — though preliminary — are promising.*

Both styles are correct. Follow the house style of your university, journal, or publisher, and be consistent throughout.

When to use commas vs. em dashes

Sometimes em dashes can be replaced with commas. For example:

- *The findings — though preliminary — are promising.*
- *The findings, though preliminary, are promising.*

Both forms set off extra information in the middle of a sentence, but they create different levels of pause and emphasis.

Use commas for light, unobtrusive interruptions

Commas work best when the added information is brief, expected, and not especially dramatic. They keep the sentence flowing smoothly.

Examples:

- *The committee, after a short discussion, approved the proposal.*
- *The sample, which was collected last year, showed similar results.*

Here, the reader notices the extra information, but it does not interrupt the flow.

Use em dashes for stronger emphasis or interruption

Em dashes signal a more pronounced pause. Use them when the interruption:

- adds contrast
- introduces something surprising
- shifts the tone or direction
- is meant to draw the reader's attention

Examples:

- *The funding was approved — after months of rejection and revision.*
- *The result — a complete reversal of previous findings — forced the researchers to rewrite the discussion.*

Here, the em dash draws attention and adds weight.

Where to find the dashes on your keyboard:

Mark	Windows	Mac
Hyphen (-)	Directly on keyboard (-)	Directly on keyboard (-)
En Dash (–)	Alt + 0150	Option + -
Em Dash (—)	Alt + 0151	Shift + Option + -

Quick decision checklist

Ask yourself:

- Is it combining words into one idea? → **Hyphen**
- Is it showing a range or a connection? → **En dash**
- Is it adding emphasis, interruption, or extra info? → **Em dash**



Em dashes & AI

You may have heard that em dashes are a “giveaway” for AI-generated writing. In reality, em dashes have been used in academic and literary writing for centuries.

What has changed is frequency: AI tools often overuse em dashes, making them more noticeable. The solution isn’t to avoid them but to use them sparingly and deliberately.

A well-placed em dash signals control, not automation.