

## Directed Learning Activity—How to Use Dashes ~~and Parentheses~~

*Description: This Directed Learning Activity (DLA) will teach you the different uses of a dash. Hopefully, after completing this lesson, you will have a better understanding of the various uses of a dash and be able to use them properly in your writing.*

*Prior Knowledge: It would be helpful to know the definition of an appositive. An appositive renames or describes a nearby noun—usually the one in front of it. For example, “My best friends, Sammy and Tony, live in San Francisco. In this sentence, Sammy and Tony is an appositive because it names or describes who the best friends are.*

### 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.*

### **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.