Grammar Guide

Hyphens versus dashes

Hyphens and dashes may look very similar, but they actually play quite different roles when used as punctuation marks in a sentence.

What is a hyphen?

Hyphens are shorter than dashes, and there are two types of hyphen: **the soft hyphen** and **the hard hyphen**. The soft hyphen and the hard hyphen look identical, but they are used in different ways. Soft hyphens are used for word breaks at the end of a line of justified, typed text. Hard hyphens remain regardless of where the word comes in the line of text.

The hard hyphen

Hard hyphens are used to connect words in a range of circumstances. This hyphen is most often used in academic writing as follows:

- **Compound adjectives** – when two or more words are used together (i.e. as a compound) to describe or modify a noun, then they are connected by a hyphen. For example, 'a well-written book' or 'a twentieth-century writer'. **Note that the hyphen is only used when a compound adjective precedes the noun it is modifying.** When these compound words follow the noun they are modifying, the hyphen is not needed. For example, 'the book was well written' or 'a writer from the twentieth century'. **Note that the hyphen is not needed to connect an adverb and adjective/verbal adjective pairing that is being used to modify a noun.** For example, 'a beautifully written book' or 'a poorly managed team'.
- **Prefixes** – hyphens are used when a prefix might otherwise result in a doubled or tripled consonant or vowel. For example, 'anti-inflammatory' or 'shell-like'.
- **Numbers and fractions** – hyphens are used to denote fractions and some numbers as words. For example, 'two-thirds' and 'twenty-five'.

What is a dash?

There are two types of dashes: **the en dash** (the length of an 'n' in any given type size) and **the em dash** (double the length of an en dash in any given type size).

The en dash

The en dash (ctrl + minus sign) is most often used in academic writing as follows:

- **Spaced dashes** – in British English, the en dash (with a space either side) is the most common style for a dash that separates a word, phrase or clause from the main clause of a sentence. For example, 'the preliminary data indicate – or so it seems at this stage – that the trial was successful'.
- **Ranges** – the en dash is used to connect two words or numbers that express a range. For example, 'pp. 519–530' or 'the library is open 10:00–16:00'. **Note that en dashes should never be combined with the words 'from' and 'to', and 'between' and 'and'.** For example, it would be incorrect to write 'the library is open from 10:00–16:00'. Either use words or the en dash but not both.
- **Relationships between words** – the en dash is used to express a relationship between two words of equal importance. For example, 'the student–tutor dynamic'.

The em dash

The em dash (ctrl + alt + minus sign) is most often used in academic writing as follows:

- **Closed-up dashes** – in American English and some British institutions, the em dash (closed up on either side) is the most common style for a dash that separates a word, phrase or clause from the main clause of a sentence. For example, 'the preliminary data indicate—or so it seems at this stage—that the trial was successful'.