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Dashes

The dash, or a pair of dashes, lets you interrupt a sentence to add information. Such interruptions can fall in the middle or at the end of a sentence. To make a dash, hit the hyphen key twice (--). Do not put a space before, between, or after the hyphens. Some word processing programs automatically convert two hyphens into an em dash.*

Using the dashes for special emphasis

If you want to emphasize an example, a definition, an appositive, or a contrast, you can use a dash. Some call the dash a “pregnant pause”—that is, take note, something special is coming. Use dashes sparingly so that you don’t dilute their impact.

Example

The care-takers—those who are helpers, nurturers, teachers, mothers—are still systematically devalued. —Ellen Goodman, “Just Woman’s Work?”

Definition

Although the emphasis at the school was mainly language—speaking, reading, writing—the lessons always began with an exercise in politeness. —Elizabeth Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

*Appositive***

Two of the strongest animals in the jungle are vegetarians—the elephant and the gorilla.

Contrast

Fire cooks food—and burns down forests. —Smokey the Bear

An aside

An aside is a writer’s comment, often the writer’s personal views, on what’s been written. Generally this technique isn’t appropriate for academic writing, so before you insert an aside, carefully consider your writing purpose and your audience.

Television showed us the war. It showed us the war in a way that was—if you chose to watch television, at least—unavoidable. —Nora Ephron, *Scribble Scribble*

From *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers*, 7th edition:

Alerts

If the words within a pair of dashes require a question mark or an exclamation point, place it before the second dash.

A first date—do you remember?—stays in the memory forever.

Never use commas, semicolons, or periods next to dashes. If such a need arises, revise your writing.

Additional Examples

Appositive

Elizabeth Barrett Browning—the wife of Robert Browning—was probably a more popular poet than her husband in the nineteenth century.

Aside

If you choose to vote today—and I don't care if you do or not—make sure you pick up a galloon of milk on the way home.

Broken-off speech

“It's not that I don't love you Tom, it's just that—”

Contrast

It's not right or wrong—just fattening.

Definition

A jackalope—a cross between a rabbit and an antelope—is not a real animal.

*To set up autocorrect for making a double dash an em dash, select insert from the top toolbar, select symbol, select special character tab, select Em Dash, select Autocorrect at bottom left, type in two hyphens in the box across from the em dash, hit okay.

**An appositive is a word or group of words that renames the noun or pronoun preceding it.

The student's story, a tale of broken promises, was complicated. (The appositive *a tale of broken promises* renames the noun *story*.)

The lawyer consulted an expert—her law professor. (The appositive *her law professor* renames the noun *expert*.)

The student, Joe Jones, asked to speak to the librarian. (The appositive *Joe Jones* renames the noun *student*.)