D-a-s-h-e-s

-The difference between the ‘em’ and ‘en’ dash-

Don’t those lines in between words just drive you nuts? Some of these little lines are longer than others, and sometimes they are thrown in places that make no sense at all. But there’s an easy way to differentiate between the different types of dashes used, and where to use both kinds.

Firstly, here’s what a dash is: dashes are used to separate lists or parenthetical expressions from the rest of a sentence in the same way as colons, semi-colons, or brackets. When tying, use two hyphens to form a dash (--). Do not put spaces before or after the dash. (If your word processing program has what is known as an “em-dash,” you may use it instead, with no space before or after it.)

Dashes are used for the following purposes:

- To set off parenthetical material that deserves emphasis
- To set off appositives that contain commas
- To prepare for a list, a restatement, an amplification, or a dramatic shift in tone or thought.
Here are some following examples of when an em dash is used, and what it looks like in a sentence.

**To set off parenthetical material that deserves emphasis**

Everything that went wrong—from the peeping Tom at her window last night to my head-on collision today—we blame on our move.

**To set off appositives which contain commas:**

*an appositive is a noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun. Ordinarily most appositives are set off with commas, but when the appositive itself contains commas, a pair of dashes helps readers see the relative importance of all the pauses.*

In my hometown the basic needs of people--food, clothing, and shelter -- are less costly than in a big city like Los Angeles.

**To prepare for a list, a restatement, an amplification, or a dramatic shift in tone or thought:**

Along the wall are the bulk liquids--sesame oil, honey, safflower oil, and that half-liquid, “peanuts only” peanut butter.

In this last semester, Peter tried to pay more attention to his priorities—applying to graduate school and getting financial aid.

Everywhere we looked there were little kids—a box of Cracker Jacks in one hand and mommy or daddy’s sleeve in the other.

Kiere took a few steps back, came running full speed, kicked a mighty kick—and missed the ball.

*in the first 2 examples, the writer could also use a colon. The colon is more formal than the dash and not quite as dramatic.*
Further differences between En and Em dashes

**En Dash**

The en dash, also sometimes called the n dash or n-rule, is so-called because it is approximately the width of the typewritten letter ‘n’.

It is the dash you would use to indicate ranges. It’s also the one used to indicate relationships or connections between words.

Occasionally, en dashes are also used for parenthetical comments, instead of em dashes, particularly in cases where the em dash would look odd, at the end of a justified line for example.

The en dash is written with a space before and after it – as in this example - separating it from the rest of the text.

**Em Dash**

The em dash, also sometimes called the m dash or m-rule, is so-called because it is approximately the width of the typewritten letter ‘m’.

Em dashes are commonly used for separating parenthetical expressions—which might indicate an abrupt change in one’s train of thought, a sudden recollection, or the insertion of some related, but non-essential, information—from the rest of a sentence. The previous sentence contains an example of a parenthetical expression.

The em dash can also be used in dialogue to denote that a speaker has been interrupted; or for an aposiopesis, a device used to show that a speaker is unwilling or unable to continue.

Generally, the em dash is written without any spaces between it and the words that precede and follow.

The practice of joining the em dash to the text is recommended by both the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and the *Oxford Guide to Style*. Some guides, however, such as the *New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*, prefer leaving a hair space (a space narrower than the one normally left between words).

**En dashes vs. Em dashes**

As stated previously, the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *Oxford Guide to Style* both recommend using the em dash for parenthetical expressions. It is also the dash of choice of the Oxford University Press.

Yet other guides, such as *The Elements of Typographic Style*, prefer the use of the en dash. The en dash is also the preferred choice of the Cambridge University Press, Penguin, and
So which to choose?

- For instances where you want to indicate a range or show a relationship, use the en dash.
- For interrupted speech, use the em dash.
- For parenthetical expressions, the choice is yours.
So now that you have gotten some examples and definitions, let’s practice!

In the spaces provided, write either an M or N for the correct dash. Some problems examples may have more than one answer. When you’re done, check your answers on the next page.

1. School is based on the three R’s – reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic.
2. Our holiday in Transylvania was terrible – too many vampires.
3. Against all odds, Pete – the unluckiest man alive – won the lottery.
4. This book is aimed at children 4-6 years of age.
5. Despite fears, the Rangers-Celtic game went off without incident.
6. The score of the Flyers-Bruins game was 3-0.
7. My relationship with my sister is simple – we fight, stay mad at each other, and make up.
8. The father-son bond was strong from the beginning.
9. Allison enjoyed her walk to the park – the weather was perfect.
10. Ben couldn’t sleep – exhausted as he was – due to the pouring rain outside.
Answer Key:

1. em or colon
2. em or colon
3. en dashes or brackets
4. en
5. en
6. en
7. em or colon
8. en
9. em
10. en dashes or brackets

Reference page

The Bedford Handbook (8th edition)