



Don't Dash Too Hastily

(If You're Speaking Parenthetically, See the Other Side of This Sheet)

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DASHES

A dash--typed with most word processors and typewriters as two unspaced hyphens between the words it separates--signals an abrupt break in thought. If used judiciously it can mark a longer pause and provide more emphasis than a comma can. If overused, it creates an impression of haste and carelessness. Dashes are useful in early drafts to capture thoughts--and afterthoughts--before they escape, but in revising you may need to delete them in favor of punctuation marks that better express your ideas. Beware of using them to cover up lapses in logic.

If you wish to use dashes effectively here are some guidelines:

- ♣ If the main sentence doesn't resume after the break, only one dash is needed:
 - He writes his plays in the ages--the ages between five and twelve.
 - I didn't like the play, but then, I saw it under adverse conditions--the curtain was up.
- ♣ If the main sentence resumes, a second dash is needed:
 - The committee agreed--with one exception--to approve the bill.
- ♣ Don't allow a comma to substitute for the second dash, and be sure that your sentence would make sense if the part within dashes were omitted.
- ♣ Use dashes to mark the beginning and end of a series which might otherwise get confused with the rest of the sentence:
 - John's outstanding virtues--his honesty, resourcefulness, and wit--appealed to Alice.
 - His three sons--Andrew, Tom, and Stanley--are arriving today.
- ♣ Dashes are also used to mark the interruption of a sentence in dialogue:
 - "Run quickly, Bill," yelled his brother. "The dog is coming after you and he's--"
 - "It's too late! He's got me by the--"
- ♣ Don't combine dashes with other punctuation marks, as in the following example.
 - **Wrong:** She acquired several items at the sale,-- an old lamp, a picture, and a vase.
 - **Right:** She acquired several items at the sale--an old lamp, a picture, and a vase.



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PARENTHESES

Parentheses (like dashes) signify a break in thought, but they mark a gentler interruption than dashes do. Material enclosed in parentheses is more like an aside in the dialogue of a play.

- ♣ Parentheses can be used to set off incidental information such as numbers, dates, examples, and references:
 - The contract will become effective in thirty (30) days.
 - This recent study reports the effects of nicotine (Smith, 1995).
 - The use of the word “human” as a noun (“Humans are sentient beings”) has been criticized by some authorities on usage.
- ♣ Parentheses can also be used to signal a digression from the main thought:
 - H. L. Mencken (considered one of the most prolific American social critics of the twentieth century) considered himself a spokesman for the “civilized minority.”
- ♣ No mark of punctuation should ever precede a parenthesis, but you can use punctuation after the closing parenthesis if necessary:
 - After weeks of exercise (including daily trips to the YMCA), he finally began to feel stronger.
 - The mysterious caller (imagine her surprise) turned out to be her long-lost brother.
- ♣ The rule is that the parenthesis shouldn't affect the punctuation of the main statement.
- ♣ If the entire sentence is enclosed (as in the preceding parenthetical note), the period comes *before* the closing parenthesis. If the enclosed matter is the last part of the sentence, the period comes *after* the parenthesis, as in the next example:
 - Although the word “data” is often used in the singular sense, it should be regarded as a plural (“These data are unreliable”).
- ♣ Like dashes, parentheses can be overused, as in
 - Prince Charles (I use quotation marks because I hardly consider him princely) will soon assume (how can he presume to do so!) the throne (it's hard to believe the British still cling to their royalty).
 - “To read a sentence like this,” writer Frederick Crews reminds us,” is comparable to being poked in the ribs several times by a drunken jokester.” So use parentheses judiciously.