

Hyphens, En-Dashes and Em-Dashes

Usage recommendations following *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage and Punctuation*

Garner (2016) and the Chicago Manual of Style (2010) give the following usage definitions for the hyphen, en-dash (or short dash), and em-dash (or long dash).

The Hyphen

The hyphen (-) is a short horizontal mark indicating the joining of word-elements (as there), the division of syllabic elements at the end of a line, or elongation in the sounding of a spoken word. The Chicago Manual of Style (2010) thus adds that a hyphen can make for easier reading by showing structure and, often, pronunciation.

The Chicago Manual of Style (2010) also adds that hyphens can be used to eliminate ambiguity. For example: the hyphen in “much-needed clothing” shows that the clothing is greatly needed rather than abundant and needed. However, when there is no ambiguity, hyphenation is unnecessary.

In addition, when compound modifiers precede a noun, hyphenation usually lends clarity as in, for example “open-mouthed” or “full-length.”

The Chicago Manual of Style (2017) guide for hyphen usage (and misuse) is given as Appendix A

The En-Dash

An en-dash (–) is a horizontal line that marks a span, a range, a tension or a pairing of equals, and can also be used for linking of points or places (X–Y).

The Chicago Manual of Style (2010) adds that an en-dash can be used in the place of hyphen in a compound adjective when one of its elements consists of an open compound or when both elements consist of hyphenated compounds (for example, post–World War II years). However, The Chicago Manual of Style (2010) notes that such a solution should be applied sparingly and only when a more elegant solution is unavailable.

The Em-Dash

An em-dash (—) is a horizontal line that marks an emphatic insertion, an informal introduction, or a sharp break in thought.

Usage of the hyphen

The Chicago Manual of Style (2010) notes that, with frequent use, open or hyphenated compounds tend to become closed. For example, “on line” has evolved from “on-line” to “online.” As a result, some closed spellings that have become widely preferred by writers have now become defined as one word, such as website (Webster’s 2013).

Garner (2016: 375–379) lists nine uses and four misuses of the hyphen

Using Hyphens

According to Garner (2016) hyphens can be used in the following cases:

1. To connect the parts of a phrase adjective—that is, a phrase whose words function together to modify a noun.

For Example:

“A chaise drew up in front of the parsonage, the horse pricking up his ears at the bell-drum-fife noise.” (Carl Sandburg)

2. To indicate the idea that the final word of a second phrasal adjective goes also with the elliptically stated first phrasal adjective, or that a suffix could be joined with another (especially an earlier) affix.

For Example:

“Interval training, in which you alternate from low- to high-impact aerobic activity, has also been shown to be quite effective.” (Sanjay Jain)

“These are short, two- or three-minute searches.” (Natalie Goldberg)

3. In certain compound nouns and noun phrases when the words are particularly closely associated (check a good current dictionary, though nonce phrases will not be listed).

For Example:

“He always liked to get visitors alone in the billiard-room and tell them stories about a mysterious lady, a foreign royalty, with whom he had driven about in London.” (C.S. Lewis)

4. When writing out fractions and two-word numbers under 100.

For example: Twenty-eight or one-fourth

5. To separate groups of numbers that are not ranges, such as telephone numbers or social-security numbers.

For Example: Sample 45-2 but not Sample 45—2

6. When spelling out a word letter by letter.

For Example: l-e-t-t-e-r.

7. With the suffixes “-less” and “-like” when the root word ends with “-ll.”

For Example: thrill-less not thrillless or ball-like not balllike

8. In proper names when appropriate.
9. To show hesitation within a word, stammering, stuttering, lengthening of a sound, or accentuating of syllables.

The Chicago Manual of Style (2017) adds that, when the second part of a hyphenated expression is omitted, the hyphen is retained followed by a space.

For Example: “fifteen- and twenty-year long trends”

Misusing Hyphens

1. Generally, do not use a hyphen after a prefix unless
 - i. the solid form might be confusing (e.g., “anti-intellectual”),
 - ii. the primary word is capitalized (e.g., “non-European citizen”),
 - iii. the prefix is part of a noun phrase (e.g., “non-contract-law doctrine”), or
 - iv. the unhyphenated form has a different meaning (e.g., “prejudicial” vs. “pre-judicial”).
2. Do not use a hyphen (or even a pair of hypens) in place of an em-dash.
3. Do not use a hyphen in a two-word adjective phrase formed with an “-ly” adverb and a participial adjective.
For Example: “widely held view” not “widely-held view.”
4. Do not use a hyphen in a phrasal verb.
For Example: “please set up the tables” not “please set-up the tables.”

Usage of the en-dash

Garner (2016: 373–374) lists four uses and two misuses of the en-dash

Using the en-dash

According to Garner (2016) the en-dash can be used for the following cases:

1. As an equivalent of “to” (as when showing a span of pages, dates or value ranges).
For example: p. 373–379, 2001–2017, 125–950 Pa s.
2. To denote a pairing in which the elements carry equal weight
For example: “Evaluation of the GOOD–BAD dimension is an automatic operation of system 1.”
3. To link a start and end point or place.
For example: “The distance X–Y is 7 km” or “the Dallas–San Francisco flight”.
4. To express tension or differences.

Misuse of the en-dash

1. Do not use the en-dash in place of a hyphen or an en-dash.
2. Do not use an en-dash in a “from-to” construction, the en-dash purporting to replace “to.”
Instead, use both “from” and “to.”

Not this: The experiment ran from 09:00–17:00.

But this: The experiment ran from 09:00 to 17:00.

Not this: The distance was measured Chicago–Glasgow.

But this: The distance was measured from Chicago to Glasgow.

Usage of the em-dash

Garner (2016: 369–372) lists five uses and two misuses of the em-dash

Using the em-dash

According to Garner (2016) the em-dash can be used for the following cases:

1. A pair of em-dashes can be used to set off an inserted phrase that, because of what it modifies, needs to go in the middle of a sentence.
For Example:
“I think you behave—and write—nicely, nobly even, if you like to be told so.” (Algernon Charles Swinburne)
2. To set off a parenthetical phrase that you might want to highlight.
For Example:
“They say—the astrologers, I mean—that it will get better and better for me as I go on.” (Henry Miller)
3. To tack on an important afterthought.
For Example:
“He just liked the early morning to himself, quiet, no voices—especially not Marion’s voice.” (Raymond Chandler)
4. To introduce a specification or a list when more of a pause is suggested than a colon may convey.
For Example:
“They sold everything here—fruit, vegetables, dairy, geese, fish.” (Isaac Bashevis Singer)
5. To show hesitation, faltering or interruption.
For Example:
“No tricks now or—.” “Oh, you can trust me, you can trust me!” (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

Misuse of the em-dash

1. Do not use more than two em-dashes in a sentence.
2. Do not use a comma, colon, semicolon, or terminal period before an em-dash. A question mark or exclamation point is acceptable in that position.

Appendix A

Chicago Manual of Style (2017: 375–384): Table of Hyphenation Guidelines

References

Garner BA (2016) *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation*. The University of Chicago Press (Chicago IL): 583 p

The Chicago Manual of Style (2010) *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. The University of Chicago Press (Chicago IL): 1026 p

Webster's (2014) *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 11th Edition*. Merriam-Webster Inc (Springfield MA): 1623 p.