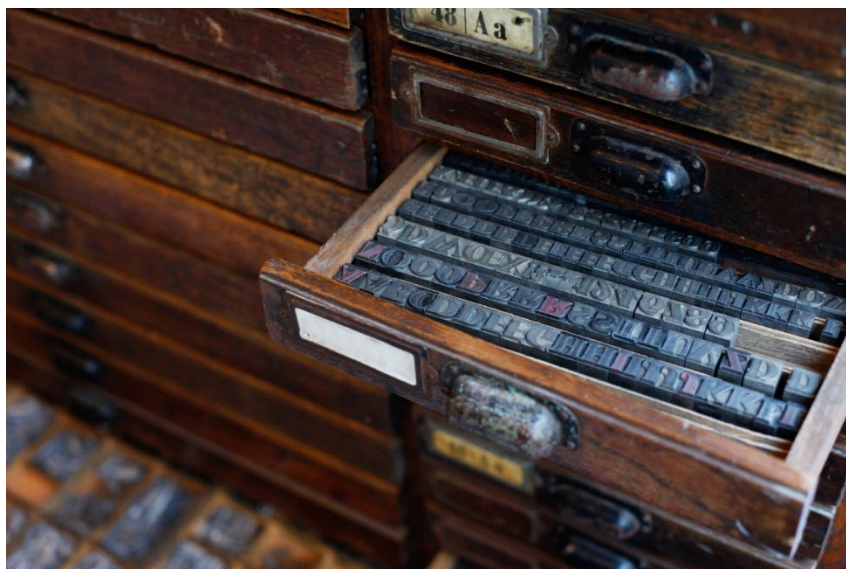


Word for Word

A quick dash through the uses of hyphens and dashes



Both hyphens and dashes connect prefixes, suffixes, and words within a sentence, but these punctuation marks have distinctive uses.

Some words always contain a hyphen (-), no matter how they are used in a sentence. Common examples are *well-being* and *mother-in-law*, which are spelled with a hyphen in the dictionary.^{1,2} Other times, a hyphen is added to a two-word phrase only when the two words are used as an adjective in the sentence.

Examples:

Low-risk patients
Whole-body imaging

But

Patients with low risk
Imaging of the whole body

Dashes come in two types: em dashes (—) and en dashes (–). These terms come from printing and typography. An em dash is the width of

a letter M in a particular font, and an en dash is half the width of an em dash (and is longer than a hyphen).³ In writing, an em dash is a long dash used to emphasize or clarify wording within a sentence.⁴

Examples:

The patients—who had previously received chemotherapy—were enrolled in the study before undergoing surgery.

The mice were then subjected to testing—the procedure is described above.

An en dash is used to clarify which words or phrases are being modified by hyphenated or compound adjectives.

Examples:

Breast cancer–related symptoms [en dash indicates that symptoms are related to breast cancer specifically, not just cancer]

Hematoxylin-eosin–stained specimens [en dash indicates that specimens are stained with hematoxylin-eosin, which already contains a hyphen]

National Institutes of Health–funded research [en dash indicates that the research is funded by the National Institutes of Health, but note that if this phrase used the abbreviation for the funding agency, NIH, only a hyphen would be needed: NIH-funded research]

The en dash and em dash symbols are not part of a standard keyboard. In Microsoft Word, they may be found in the symbol menu (under Insert/Symbols/Symbol/More Symbols/Special Characters), where shortcut keys for the two symbols are also provided.

References

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