

Greetings!

Special Edition: National Punctuation Day

Yes, dear reader, it's upon us again! National Punctuation Day is September 24, and it's time to celebrate!!

No, we're not making this up. Yes, Virginia, there really is a National Punctuation Day, and we at KB COMM are all about it. In the spirit of what we believe should be a national holiday, here are a few tips for unraveling everyone's favorite horizontal-line mysteries: the hyphen, en dash, and em dash.

The Hyphen

The hyphen, also known simply as a dash, is the workhorse of the dash family. You insert a hyphen by pressing the key to right of the 0 on the top row of your keyboard. This works no matter what software application or computer operating system you're using, because unlike the en and em dash, the hyphen is part of the standard ASCII character set. Your friend the hyphen will always be there for you! KB COMM is a certified Women's Business Enterprise. We are officially qualified to participate in corporations' woman- and minority-owned vendor programs.

The main grammatical purpose of the hyphen is to join two or more words that team up to modify a noun. This multiword mash-up is known in the trade as a compound modifier. Look no further than the second paragraph of this newsletter for a nifty example. In the last sentence of the paragraph, we say "everyone's favorite horizontal-line mysteries." In this phrase, *horizontal-line* is a two-word adjective that modifies the noun *mysteries*. The two words are hyphenated because they work together to modify the noun.

If the compound modifier includes three or more words, hyphenate between *all* the words that are part of the modifier (e.g., *point-of-sale system*, *around-the-clock coverage*).

You should always insert hyphens between the words in a compound modifier, except (you knew this was coming, right?) for the following special situations:

- Do not hyphenate after the adverb *very* or after adverbs ending in *ly*. In other words, don't allow your *finely tuned epistle* to crash on the shoals of incorrect hyphenation. If the compound modifier contains three or more words, you still need to insert hyphens between the other words in the modifier (*profoundly mood-altering substances*).
- Do not hyphenate a compound modifier that is not immediately followed by a noun. In other words, *I have a full-time job*, but *Bob does not work full time*. In the second example, the modifier *full time* is not immediately followed by a noun, so it is not hyphenated.

Hyphens also are correctly used as part of some prefixes. You do not normally use hyphens after prefixes such as semi and auto. However, a hyphen should appear:

- Before a capitalized word or a numeral (*sub-Saharan*, *pre-1950*)
- Before a hyphenated or open compound term (*non-self-sustaining*, *pre-Vietnam War*)
- To separate two i's, two a's, and other combinations of letters or syllables that might be misread (*anti-inflammatory*, *recreation* vs. *re-creation*)
- To separate repeated terms in a double prefix (*sub-subentry*)
- When a prefix or combining form stands alone (*over- and underused*, *macro- and microeconomics*)

The En Dash

The en dash is a bit longer than the hyphen. Use an en dash to indicate a range of values (e.g., 10-12) and as a substitute for the word to (e.g., the Paris-London train).

The tricky thing about the en dash (and the em dash) is that they are not part of the standard ASCII character set on your keyboard. So how do you insert an en dash? It depends on the authoring application you are using. In MS Word, select Insert > Symbol from the menu. Click the Special Character tab, select En Dash, and click Insert. You can also use the Word keyboard shortcut (Ctrl+NumLock -).

If you are in an application other than Word, inserting any special character can be a challenge because there might not be a menu selection or keyboard shortcut that allows it. But more often than not, if you are working in a Windows-based application, you can use the following combination of keys to insert an en dash:

Press and hold **Alt** and enter **0150** on the numeric keypad.

If you are using the Mac OS, the same concept applies, but the key combination will be different.

Ironically, the text editor we must use to publish this newsletter does not allow us to insert en or em dashes, so we can't show you what they look like! If you find yourself in this situation, use a single hyphen instead of an en dash and two hyphens to indicate an em dash.

The Em Dash

The em dash is twice as long as the en dash. Use an em dash, or a pair of em dashes, to set off an amplifying or explanatory element in a sentence.

For example:

It was the person she feared most—the dentist.

My friends—that is, my former friends—ganged up on me.

Do not use more than two em dashes in one sentence. If more than two elements need to be set off, use parentheses.

Like the en dash, the em dash is a special character. In Word, you can insert one as described above for the en dash, except you select Em Dash from the list of special characters. The Word keyboard shortcut for the em dash is **Alt+Ctrl+NumLock -**. In other Windows-based applications, try **Alt+0151**.

What About Spaces?

Do not insert spaces before or after hyphens, en dashes, or em dashes, unless you are using a hyphen to indicate a standalone prefix. Then there should be a space after the hyphen (e.g., *over- and underused*).

Extended Family Members

The dash family tree actually has more members, including the 2-em and 3-em. These are what they sound like—two or three em dashes entered in a row.

According to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the 2-em indicates a missing word or part of a word, either intentionally omitted to disguise a name or expletive or else used to represent missing or illegible content in quoted or reprinted material.

Likewise according to *Chicago*, the 3-em is used in a bibliography entry to represent the same author or editor named in the preceding entry.

We're guessing you probably won't find many uses for the 2-em and 3-em in your routine communications. But aren't they fun?

Now, thanks to National Punctuation Day, you can impress your friends and colleagues with your ability to correctly use hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes! We hope you enjoyed this special edition of *KB CommEntary*. Stay tuned for our regular Fall 2010 issue, coming in a few weeks.

And please remember, *when it has to be right*, KB COMM is here to help.

Sincerely,

Kathy

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