

DASHES

Dashes can take the place of commas, parentheses, and even colons. The punctuation you choose to use will often depend on your own style and the effect you're trying to create. Dashes are stronger and more forceful than commas, and they interrupt sentences more abruptly. On the other hand, they connect the words on each side of them more closely than parentheses do. A dash is less formal than a colon. The grouped sentences below can help you think about the choices available to you.

A dash is usually formed by hitting the hyphen key on the keyboard twice. There is no space before or after it.

Interrupting an Idea

Dashes can be used to set off sharp interruptions in the thought of a sentence.

Once--and once was enough--I tried sky-diving.
Once (and once was enough) I tried sky-diving.
Once, and once was enough, I tried sky-diving.

Explaining Nouns

Dashes can be used to set off a description that might be confused with the noun they explain.

My three sons--Bip, Bop, and Boo--brought buckets of barley from the barn.
My three sons (Bip, Bop, and Boo) brought buckets of barley from the barn.
My three sons, Bip, Bop, and Boo, brought buckets of barley from the barn.

Note that commas make this last version especially confusing, Did Bip, Bop, and Boo **help** the three sons, or **were** they the three sons?

Tony's punch--a right to the midsection--doubled up
Tony's punch, a right to the midsection, doubled up
Tony's punch (a right to the midsection) doubled up

Introducing Lists

Replacing a colon, a dash after a sentence (an independent clause) can introduce a list.

The street was littered with garbage--newspapers, crushed cans, gum wrappers.
The street was littered with garbage: newspapers, crushed cans, gum wrappers.

Changing Direction

A dash can also be used to indicate hesitation in speech, a broken-off sentence, or a sudden turn in thought before an idea is completed.

I stopped for a hamburger at--what's the name of that place?

She skipped her coffee, tripped over the dog, ran down the steps--and missed her bus anyway.

Practice

Insert one or more dashes in each of the following sentences. Which ones are really needed for the sentence to be clear?

1. His schemes were always elaborate, ingenious, and exciting and wholly impractical.
2. Athletics that is, winning athletics, have become a profitable university operation.
3. On the mosquito's sides had been two flattened sacs, and from them she now pulled out wings!
4. The cheesecake, my favorite dessert, was all gone by the time I arrived.
5. The qualities Monet painted sunlight, rich shadows, deep colors were abundant around the rivers and gardens he used as subjects.
6. I don't know if I can win, but I'd sure like to try.
7. I'm just taking American History (a core requirement) and guitar.
8. I gave my neighbors, Alicia, Grace, and Isabel, a ride to the concert.
9. He was so hungry he bought almost everything he could see: cotton candy, corn dogs, scones, ice cream.
10. He was so hungry he bought cotton candy, scones, corn dogs, even deep-fried pickles.

Answers

1. His schemes were always elaborate, ingenious, and exciting--and wholly impractical.
2. Athletics--that is, winning athletics--have become a profitable university operation.
Some punctuation is needed around any interruption, although it doesn't have to be dashes.
3. On the mosquito's sides had been two flattened sacs--and from them she now pulled out wings!
4. The cheesecake--my favorite dessert--was all gone by the time I arrived.
5. The qualities Monet painted--sunlight, rich shadows, deep colors--were abundant around the rivers and gardens he used as subjects.
6. I don't know if I can win--but I'd sure like to try.
7. I'm just taking American History--a core requirement--and guitar.
8. I gave my neighbors--Alicia, Grace, and Isabel--a ride to the concert.
*Dashes or parentheses make it clear that the neighbors **are** Alicia, Grace, and Isabel are the neighbors. They weren't offered a ride along **with** Alicia, Grace, and Isabel.*
9. He was so hungry he bought almost everything he could see--cotton candy, corn dogs, scones, ice cream.
10. He was so hungry he bought cotton candy, scones, corn dogs--even deep-fried pickles.