

### Tip #5. Dash it all!

For such a small gizmo in the writer's toolbox the humble dash is the source of much perplexity.

Many writers aren't aware the little critter has several forms, much less how to create those forms in Microsoft Word, let alone when to use each one. This is compounded further when stylistic preferences come into play, and yet again when UK English meets American. While there are some basic rules worth following, probably the best advice of all is to keep it simple, find the usage style you like, and above all, be consistent in your use.

Below is my quick and nasty guide to the main uses of dashes and how they differ from hyphens. Let's examine the fine lines we encounter most.

1. The hyphen: -
2. The en dash: –
3. The em dash: —

We can see the en dash is roughly twice the length of the hyphen; the em dash roughly three times the length. The actual lengths and how they've changed from typewriter to pc are unimportant. What's important is that one's small, one's medium and one's large.

Let's look at their mainstream uses.

1. Typically the hyphen either joins two words to form a new word eg. ice-field, or helps connect a word that overruns onto the next line by acting as a bridge between syllables.
2. The en dash, by contrast, connects items across a range. eg. pages 37–55, or maybe 1999–2004 or April–September.
3. The em dash has several uses. It can replace a colon or a comma if you want to add emphasis at the end of a sentence. eg. It was a thekwane—a bird of death.  
Like commas em dashes can set apart a clause—useful if your clause also contains a comma, like this—or it can be used to indicate a sudden interruption. eg. “Watch out! It's gonna explo—”

These days many people use the en dash as an em dash and that's perfectly acceptable, as long as you're consistent. Some confusion also comes in with regard to “spacing”. Typically UK users insert spaces on either side of en and em dashes, while American users don't. These are all stylistic choices. Again, the main thing is that you're consistent; don't space one dash and then zero space the next.

So how do we create all these fine lines in MS Word? Here's one simple way (there are others).

For a hyphen simply type the minus/hyphen sign.

For an en dash type: “something - something ” (word-space-hyphen-space-word-space).

For an em dash type: “something--something ” (word-hyphen-hyphen-word-space).

Once you’ve made your dash you can go back and add or remove spaces as required and your dash keeps it’s form.

Gotta dash!

Till next time. Break a lead.