

edited by Della Mundy

A Question of Teaching Punctuation

A faculty member teaching science editing to graduate students finds that the students tend to be confused about use of hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes. And she is unsure whether she herself has an entirely firm grasp of the subject. What materials could she best consult for guidance? What points about this subject should she emphasize to the students? More broadly, what resources should she recommend for help on tricky points of punctuation (including not only the above but also, for example, use of semicolons and use of brackets within parentheses)?

Solutions

For the use of hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes, I always rely on *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th edition. A good summary of which marks to use when appears in Chapter 5 under "Dash". How to mark the various uses appears in Chapter 2. I regret this division, but the same thing is true in Karen Judd's *Copyediting: A Practical Guide* (Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, 1982), which also contains an easy summary of which punctuation to use when.

As for broader matters of punctuation, Chapter 5 of the *Chicago Manual* covers the subject in as much detail as I usually need. Nevertheless, a class of graduate students being taught science editing should certainly know the style manuals published for particular fields of science: *Scientific Style and Format: The CBE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*, 6th edition; the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*; and the *American Medical Association (AMA) Manual of Style*, 9th edition. An additional advantage of knowing these reference books is that they sometimes differ from the *Chicago Manual*. Some scientists like to stick closely to the manual they think is used most in their field.

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When a phrase posing some tricky issues of hyphenation appeared in a recent manuscript, I knew I needed help. The *AMA Manual of Style* and *Scientific Style*

and *Format* were useful, but I turned to our publisher's managing editor for another opinion.

After she consulted with several copy-editor colleagues at her facility, we decided on a solution I can now explain to students and myself! I find that the books simply don't cover all situations equally well, and sometimes my best resources are experienced colleagues.

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We use the *AMA Manual of Style* and *Scientific Style and Format*, which satisfy most questions of punctuation, including hyphens and en dashes. For en dashes, we are particular about using them when the concept of "to" is meant and when compound words are joined. We don't use or recommend an en dash for the minus sign in material that is going to be printed. A minus sign in most mathematics or symbol fonts is longer and thinner than an en dash. We use the Mathematical Pi font set. In the updated edition of *Mathematics into Type* (E Swanson, A O'Sean, A Schleyer, American Mathematical Society, Providence RI, 1999), the minus sign is listed as one of the mathematical symbols. Certainly anyone who does not have a symbol or mathematics font can use an en dash to simulate a minus sign, but it isn't the same. Perhaps the best answer is that using an en dash for a minus sign is like using your computer as a typewriter (not a typesetter).

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Achieving consensus among editors on the appropriate use of hyphens and dashes is a considerable task. No two of our most commonly used reference books or style guides offer the same advice, either proscriptively or descriptively. So, in the face of having to decide the "right" way, it's up to the individual editor or teacher to determine which approach makes the most sense and then to apply it consistently. Students of hyphenation may first be guided by the

The situations described as new questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Department of Medical Editing, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone 510-625-2373; fax 510-625-5231; e-mail

dictionary and style guide that have been adopted by the publication or instructor for which they are completing an assignment.

Two schools of thought seem to exist vis-à-vis hyphenation, especially the hyphenation of modifying phrases. The first advocates hyphenation of most phrases, for example, “public-health concerns”. With the hyphen in place, the meaning is clear, both words are understood as a single concept, that is, concerns about public health, rather than public concerns about health. Proponents of the other school of thought (of which I confess to be one) argue that the term “public health” is common parlance and its meaning is well understood as a modifier in this context. An example of an ambiguous phrase in which a hyphen is necessary for accurate meaning (taken from the *AMA Manual of Style*) is “small bowel constriction” versus “small-bowel constriction”. The hyphen distinguishes between a small constriction of the bowel and a constriction of the small bowel. Taking a phrase apart in these ways may help students of hyphenation understand when a hyphen contributes to clarity and when it is optional.

Use of the en dash may be a little trickier. In a modifying phrase, an en dash is commonly used to join modifiers of equal weight where, for example, one of them is one word and the other is two, as in “epicardial pad–epicardium interface”, meaning the interface of the epicardial pad and the epicardium. (In the first school of hyphenation thought above, the term “epicardial pad” would be hyphenated.) Another example is the compound modifier in the phrase “blood stream–exposed device surfaces”. This translates to the surfaces of the device exposed to the blood stream.” According to the 29th edition of *Dorland’s Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, “blood stream” is two words, and the en dash indicates that both words combine with “exposed” to modify “device surfaces”. A style that uses hyphens in all compound modifiers would dictate hyphenation of blood stream, thus, “blood-stream–exposed

device surfaces”. Again, deconstructing the phrase may help the editor or student understand which words modify and which are modified.

Obviously this is a cursory explanation of when to use hyphens and en dashes in modifying phrases. More comprehensive explanations and plentiful examples of these and em dashes as well are available in several readily available sources: *Scientific Style and Format*, the *AMA Manual of Style*, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, and *The Chicago Manual of Style*. A brief, no-nonsense approach to hyphenation appears in *The Associated Press Guide to Punctuation*. No style guide addresses every hyphenation situation an editor or student might encounter. Extrapolating from the examples and applying common sense to the actual meaning of individual phrases and documents will help students and editors use a consistent style in the documents they are editing.

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Editor’s note: The CSE Web site (www.CouncilScienceEditors.org) also leads viewers to relevant sites. andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing (Guide to Grammar and Style, by Jack Lynch) has a brief, cogent description of use of dashes.

New Question: A Question of Science Writing

A journalist writing an article on the effectiveness of a new medical treatment interviews the principal investigator of the scientific study that showed benefit from the treatment and is impressed with the details she hears. While keeping the reader’s interest, what measures should she take to maximize the credibility of her article? Are there any particular assumptions she should avoid stating in writing so as not to magnify the conclusions or confuse readers?