

## Chalk It Up to the Greeks

*If you take hyphens seriously,  
you will surely go mad.*  
—John Benbow, *Manuscript and Proof*,  
1937

Many nonwriters lump hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes together as “some sort of hyphen”, and even some experienced writers find them confusing. What follows is a mock recreation of a bantering question-and-answer approach that I’ve found works well when I’ve had to introduce dashes at training sessions for nonwriters. Space limitations prevent an exhaustive treatment.

I begin the meeting by giving each attendee a new piece of 3-inch blackboard chalk, meanwhile uttering comments like, “Here’s your em dash. Sorry, I couldn’t find any black ones.”

Usually it isn’t long until someone seizes the bait:

**Q:** I don’t get it. What’s with the chalk? And *what* kind of dash?

**A:** Break off an inch. [I wait until everyone does.]

- Think of the unbroken 3-inch original as a dash (properly called an *em dash* or a *long dash*).
- Think of the 2-inch piece as an *en dash*.
- Think of the 1-inch piece as a *hyphen*.

**Q:** Why do I need to know this stuff?

**A:** Short answer: A computer is not a typewriter.

Not many people reflect on the full implications of the term *desktop publishing*. Like it or not, your computer has turned you into a kind of typesetter. Unlike a typewriter, your computer lets you print many symbols that heretofore you could find only in a typesetter’s composing tray. Previously, you had to simulate en and em dashes with double or triple hyphens, or with “floating” hyphens—the ones that have spaces fore and aft. Typesetters converted them.

As copy production has become electronically telescoped into print produc-

tion, the writers and editors who start the process of producing the printed word—and picture—are now connected more closely than ever with the mechanics of bringing ideas to print. [*The New York Public Library Writer’s Guide to Style and Usage*, 1994, p 767.]

**Q:** I always wondered: Why did typesetters wear green eyeshades?

**A:** To hide their receding hairlines.

**Q:** Where did the name *hyphen* come from?

**A:** The hyphen was originally *huphen* in Greek, meaning “as one” or “treat as one”.

The ancient Greeks were the first civilization to use hyphens as graphical signposts to help the reader group the print blocks streaming past the eye.

Just as we do today, the Greeks inserted “treat-as-ones” between

- Parts of a multisyllabic word when they had to break it at the end of a line.
- Two or more words to group them logically, as in *merry-go-round*.

This told the reader that the two parts on two lines made up one word or, if inserted between two or more words, that the words should be treated as one thought unit.

**Q:** Enough about hyphens. Let’s get back to the pieces of chalk. What’s this 2-inch one again?

**A:** The en dash is a convention introduced centuries later in the era of lead-typeset printing. Typesetters measured the space occupied by the letter *n* on the printed page and devised a midline horizontal bar about that long—longer than a hyphen—for purposes I’ll explain.

**Q:** Why three kinds of dashes? Aren’t two enough?

**A:** Not quite. We’ll cover em dashes in a minute, but first, the en dash. It’s sort of the neglected child of the dash family, but still,

it definitely has its place.

It is used to place imaginary “bookends” around measurement spans:

*The information about the green moss peacock butterfly is found on pages 101–103.*

*Each year, the yellow rice borer (Tryporyza incertulas) destroys rice that could feed 100–125 million people.*

The en dash can convey distinction, disjunction, or opposition, roughly equivalent to the words *to*, *through*, or *versus*:

*We took a Cairo–Muscat–Hong Kong flight.*

*We established a normal–abnormal range for the results of the study.*

The en dash is also used in conjunction with the hyphen to indicate the logical subordination of descriptors that together make up a unit of three words or more that modify another word:

*The researchers found that the vitamin-D-deficient cohort experienced a higher rate of cancer.*

**Q:** OK, you’ve sold me on en dashes, but how about em dashes? How are *they* used?

**A:** The em dash is a midline horizontal bar that occupies roughly the typespace of the capital letter M on the printed page—about twice as wide as the letter n and 3 times as wide as a hyphen.

Probably the most common use of an em dash is to interject a parenthetical element into an otherwise continuous flow of thought in a sentence, as in this sentence: *The 3-inch unbroken piece of chalk is—or was—an em dash.*

The Council of Science Editors’ *Scientific Style and Format, Sixth Edition* (1994) notes that “the set-off statement usually defines, elaborates, emphasizes, explains, or summarizes” and is a “sharp break, tangential and not vital to the sentence’s central message” (p 53).

Two other common uses (there are several more):

- As a colon substitute, for variety or to achieve a smoother word flow:

*The protocol involves two steps—filtration and cDNA preparation.*

Used this way, the em dash can suggest a slightly longer forced pause than that provided by a comma but shorter than that imposed by a colon. Also, it can provide a variation when too many items introduced by colons would occur in succession.

- To introduce the author’s name after an epigraph or stand-alone quote:

*Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like bananas.*

—John Lennon

No spaces. Do not insert a space before or after an em dash. [Note: Check with the style guide that governs the documents at your workplace; some institutions might stipulate two or three hyphens—with or without spaces before and after—instead.]

**Q:** Now that I know what the various dashes are, how do I find them on my keyboard?

**A:** As you know, hyphens have their own key. The quickest way to generate en or em dashes in Microsoft Word on a Windows-based keyboard is to use the following keyboard shortcuts (both require “Num Lock” activation first):

- *En dash:* Press “Ctrl”; hit the hyphen key at the top right of the number pad (not the hyphen key on the main part of the keyboard).

- *Em dash:* Press “Alt” + “Ctrl”; hit the hyphen key at the top right of the number pad (not the hyphen key on the main part of the keyboard).

Here are two sources for further guidance:

- The Dash: [grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/dash.htm](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/dash.htm).

- Hyphens, En Dashes, Em Dashes: [www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/cmosfaq](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/cmosfaq) and click on “Hyphens, En Dashes, Em Dashes” in the left column.

Chuckle of the Month: If all the cars in the United States were placed end-to-end, it would probably be the Fourth of July weekend.