

Using Dashes

What is a dash?

A dash is a mechanical tool used to separate elements of a sentence. Though it is quite similar to a comma, it is more informal and emphatic and thus should be used with caution in formal writing.

A dash is used to...

⇒ **Emphasize parenthetical material**

Parenthetical material is extra information about a noun that may make the sentence more clear, but is unnecessary for the meaning of the sentence. Using commas or parentheses places less emphasis on the material.

A dash looks like...

• *Workplace stress, from long hours to fear of being down-sized, is reducing the productivity of the American white-collar worker.*

• ***Workplace stress—from long hours to fear of being down-sized—is reducing the productivity of the American white-collar worker.***

⇒ **Set off appositives**

An appositive is extra information about a noun that *renames* the noun in order to make the sentence more clear. Using commas or parentheses places less emphasis on the material.

• *China, the most densely populated nation on earth, has only about two percent of the land suitable for agriculture in the world.*

• ***China—the most densely populated nation on earth—has only about two percent of the land suitable for agriculture in the world.***

***Especially appositives that contain commas**

Using commas changes the meaning of the sentence.

• *Her musical talent, genius is perhaps a more accurate word, is wasted by simply teaching and never performing.*

• ***Her musical talent—genius is perhaps a more accurate word—is wasted by simply teaching and never performing.***

⇒ **Indicate a change in thought, tone, or feeling**

Using commas changes the meaning of the sentence *and* does not indicate any change.

• *The naval tour included four ships, two destroyers, an aircraft carrier, and a submarine.*

• ***The naval tour included four ships—two destroyers, an aircraft carrier, and a submarine.***