

# The Dash

## The **Black Sheep** of the Punctuation Family



The **Dash** tends to be an underused punctuation mark by many student writers. Use a **Dash** when you want to show a special strong emphasis on a group of words. A **Dash** does not generally take the place of a comma, but it can be substituted for one for the sake of clarity (see # 7). It should also not be substituted for the colon (which generally just announces information).

1. Following a list of words, use a dash to introduce the explanation of the words (usually starts with *these*, *all*, or *none*)

Love, peace, and freedom—these were the ideas that drove the 1960's counterculture.



2. Use a dash to set off an idea that emphasizes something about the first idea.

Harry flew on his broom through the Forbidden Forrest—a very perilous journey.



3. Use two dashes to encase an interrupted thought that you wish to emphasize. This thought can be a complete sentence.



The actress—who was broke— decided to be in the movie that would film in Antarctica.

The director was ecstatic—he yelled out in joy—when he heard the actress had signed on for the film.

4. Use a dash to set off a surprising element that adds dimension to the preceding idea.

The door flew open and the children laughed at what they saw—the puppy entangled in toilet paper!



5. Use a dash to introduce further information to a sentence where there is a clear interruption in continuity.

The teacher vowed to find the person who stole his coffee—although he didn't know how to begin his search for the bandit.



6. Use a dash to mark a sudden interruption in dialogue.

“The *Harry Potter* series ends with Harry and Voldemort—” John began, before being punched by his angry friend, Louis, who hadn’t finished the book.



7. Use a dash to set off a word group that already has commas in it.

There are several fun rides—such as Space Mountain, Soarin, Test Track, and Expedition Everest—to check out at Disney World.



*Here’s a little story to memorize to help you remember when to use the Dash!*

The Dash was scorned by its family, the Punctuations, because he kept explaining and emphasizing his girlfriend, Neighboring Idea. However, Neighboring Idea then dumped The Dash when he kept interrupting and surprising her.

*How do I create a dash when typing?*

**A dash (—) is different from the shorter horizontal line, the hyphen ( - ).**  
(for Microsoft Word)

1. Type the word that will be before the dash
2. Immediately (no space) type two hyphens with no spaces in between
3. Type your next word
4. Once you enter in a space following that word, the two hyphens will automatically join to form a dash.

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*The following resource was consulted in the design of this handout:*  
Harris, Muriel. *Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Upper Saddle River , NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.

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