Hyphens and Dashes

**Problem:** Hyphens and dashes look very similar, so it can be easy to misapply them. However, misused hyphens can confuse meaning in a piece of writing, and an overuse of dashes can cause writing to become choppy and fragmented.

**Solution:** Know the difference between hyphens and dashes.

- Hyphen (-) are used to combine words.
- Dashes (--) are used in place of other punctuation to emphasize information in the sentence.
- Dashes are made up of two hyphens with no spaces between them. However, most computers replace them with a solid dash (—).

**Use hyphens . . .**

1) To write out numbers from 21 to 99.
   - Incorrect: forty nine
   - Correct: forty-nine

2) To connect two adjectives into one (when they come BEFORE the noun they modify).
   - Incorrect: This nineteenth century novel is very scandalous.
   - Correct: This nineteenth-century novel is very scandalous.
   - Correct: I found this novel from the nineteenth century to be very scandalous.

3) With the prefixes all-, ex-, and self- and with the suffix -elect
   - Incorrect: Julie was upset to see her exboyfriend at the concert with another girl.
   - Correct: Julie was upset to see her ex-boyfriend at the concert with another girl.

   - Incorrect: In the U.S., the president elect is always inaugurated in January.
   - Correct: In the U.S., the president-elect is always inaugurated in January.
Use Dashes . . .

1) Before a list at the end of a sentence (when you want to make a stronger break than using a colon)
   Example: You only need three things in order to become a good musician—practice, practice, practice.

   Example: It’s easy to get to the stadium from here—just take a left on 6th street and follow it all the way down toward Campbell.

2) On both sides of extra information added to the middle of a sentence (instead of using parenthesis or commas).

   Example: Marcia, who has always forgetful—left the door unlocked.

   Example: Marcia—who has always been forgetful—left the door unlocked.

In these instances, dashes are a stylistic choice, creating added emphasis in places where other punctuation could be used. While dashes can add texture and subtly to your writing, it is important not to overuse them.

Overused:
All morning we have been over at Don Emilio’s house listening to him talk about rain songs—and singing a few. Now we are sitting in the drum maker’s yard—drinking coffee—on the edge of Potam. Felipe and the drum maker are negotiating—Felipe wants to take a drum back to Arizona and hopes the drum maker will take his dark green Stetson in trade. It is a handsome hat—the drum maker has admired it before. Felipe keeps it wrapped in a plastic bag behind the seat of the pickup—away from the dust.

Effective:
All morning we have been over at Don Emilio’s house listening to him talk about rain songs—and singing a few. Now we are sitting in the drum maker’s yard on the edge of Potam, drinking coffee. Felipe and the drum maker are negotiating. Felipe wants to take a drum back to Arizona and hopes the drum maker will take his dark green Stetson in trade. It is a handsome hat, and the drum maker has admired it before. Felipe keeps it wrapped in a plastic bag behind the seat of the pickup away from the dust.

—adapted from “Yopo Nooki Enchanted Talk” by Larry Evers and Felipe Molina