Dashes

Dashes are punctuation marks that separate or "set off" written material. Although they perform a role similar to those of commas and parentheses, dashes show a more abrupt pause or shift in a sentence. Dashes add more emphasis to the material they set off. This emphasis can add drama or emotion to the affected words, phrases, or clauses.

Notice the difference in tone in the following pair of sentences. In the second sentence, a dash replaces the comma used in the first sentence to emphasize the phrase "their own prejudices." The resulting sentence conveys a much darker emotion than the sentence with comma.

- The speaker forced members of the audience to confront something that they never wanted to acknowledge, their own prejudices.
- The speaker forced members of the audience to confront something that they never wanted to acknowledge—their own prejudices.

Placement and Formatting

Dashes can be placed in the middle or at the end of a sentence (see below for examples of placement). When using a word processing program, a dash is formed by typing two hyphens in a row (--). The program will automatically convert this into a dash (—). Remember that there are no spaces before or after the dash.

Uses of the Dash

1. Emphasizing explanatory material
Julius Caesar—the first Roman Emperor—ruled until his untimely death in 44 BCE.

2. Emphasizing material at the end of a sentence
Sumerian civilization developed one of the most vital implements of the modern world—the wheel.

3. Marking a sudden change in tone
The Assyrian Empire's brutality allowed for the rapid growth of their realm—but it ultimately brought their downfall.

4. Setting off material in combination with commas
The accomplishments for which historians revere Egyptian society—hieroglyphics, architecture, and sophisticated religious practices, just to name a few—are innumerable.

5. Using dashes vs. hyphens
Remember this guideline: Dashes are longer (—), so they are used between words, phrases, or clauses (groups of words). Hyphens are shorter (-), so they are only used between prefixes and words to make compound words such as *self-esteem*.

Activity

Change each sentence to include a dash or pair of dashes to set off the bolded part of the sentence.

1. Her husband's claim that he was too tired to take out the trash **a weak excuse if she ever heard one** was one item on his long list of grievances.

2. People make decisions to benefit those whom they consider most important **themselves.**

3. She was excited to go to the concert **until she learned that her ex was also going**.

4. The recipe called for variety of fresh fruits, including strawberries **her favorite** bananas, raspberries, and blueberries.

5. After 40 years of work, Alex was proud to say that he was a **self-made man a title that his parents would have been proud of if they had been alive.**

Answer Key for Activity

1. Her husband's claim that he was too tired to take out the trash—a weak excuse if she ever heard one—was one item on his long list of grievances.

2. People make decisions to benefit those whom they consider most important—themselves.

3. She was excited to go to the concert—until she learned that her ex was also going.

4. The recipe called for a variety of fresh fruits, including strawberries—her favorite—bananas, raspberries, and blueberries.

5. After 40 years of work, Alex was proud to say that he was a self-made man—a title that his parents would have been proud of if they had been alive.

References

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2010. Print.