Parentheses & Dashes

This section will help you:
- understand how parentheses and dashes should be used
- recognize errors in the use of parentheses and dashes
- use parentheses and dashes correctly in your own writing

Review of Parentheses and Dashes

Parentheses and dashes are separators. They set off certain words, phrases, or clauses from the rest of the sentence.

- After dinner, Theo served baklava (a Turkish dessert).
  - definition set off by parentheses

- Recent American presidents–Johnson, Carter, Reagan–have had supportive wives.
  - list of examples set off by dashes

There is only one absolute rule for the use of parentheses and dashes:

Do not use parentheses or dashes to enclose words or phrases that are needed to make the sentence complete.

Cowboys often–return tired–and dusty. (incorrect)
- this phrase within dashes contains the verb of the sentence
Cowboys–tired and dusty–returned to the bunkhouse. (correct)
- neither subject nor verb appears within the dashes

Parentheses

- Use parentheses to enclose brief definitions and explanations.
  - The holograph (the author’s handwritten manuscript) showed many corrections.
  - Hemingway stood up at his typewriter (he wanted to stay in shape) and often typed late into the night.

- Use parentheses to set of publication information. For citations in reference to books, periodicals, etc. use parentheses to set of the reference.
  - Only one student had read Amazon Ears (Boston: Lee Press, 1984).
  - “China entered upon a disastrous period of its history” (McNeill 174).

- Do not use parentheses to set off words and phrases that are logically connected to other parts of the sentence.
  - The geometry teacher defined a line as (an infinite series of points). (incorrect)
  - The geometry teacher defined a line as an infinite series of points. (correct)

- To check the use of parentheses, try leaving out the words or phrases enclosed by parentheses when you read the sentence. If the sentence is complete and still makes sense, the parentheses have been used correctly.
  - This sentence can stand alone without the words enclosed in parentheses.
  - Claude Debussy (the French composer) was born in 1862.
  - Claude Debussy was born in 1862.

- Unless one parenthesis comes at the beginning of the sentence, the period is placed outside the other parenthesis.
  - She moved from Washington to Dover (the capital of Delaware).
  - (Don’t turn the page.)

Dashes

A dash appears in printed books as an unbroken line. But in handwritten or typed form, the dash appears as two
hyphens—just like these, for example. In word processing programs, two hyphens will automatically be combined into a dash. Notice that no space is left before, between, or after the marks.

Use dashes to separate a series of items from the rest of the sentence.

His wide range of interests—student government, sports, and travel—impressed the admissions committee.

Use a dash to signal an afterthought. An afterthought is an additional thought or idea that the writer wants to add to the main idea of the sentence. The dash introduces and gives emphasis to the afterthought.

Kathy will graduate next semester—she must, of course, first pass Biology 498.
None of the researchers noticed the green mold—an unusual oversight.

Dashes can be used to enclose a brief explanation or example. The inserted explanatory words in this sentence are not needed to make the sentence complete.

Hard candy—the kind often found in Christmas stockings—can damage children’s teeth.

Dashes should not be used.

To set off a series that is needed to make the sentence complete.

Last year—Hartford and Brighton University—canceled their rugby programs. (incorrect)

To set off a series that is joined to the rest of the sentence by a preposition (such as “of,” “for,” or “with.”

She laid out an exquisite quilt made of—satin, calico, and white lace. (incorrect)

To separate prepositions (to, with, for, over) from their objects.

The clues pointed to—the butler. (incorrect)

To separate verbs from their objects.

Simpson got—the job Murphy wanted. (incorrect)

To separate conjunctions (and, but) from the words that follow.

He suddenly leaped from his chair and—rushed out the door. (incorrect)

In a series set off by dashes the word “and” before the last item is optional.

The display of jewelry from Indian tribes—Navajo, Apache, Zuni—brought visitors from many states.

Key Points to Remember

- Parentheses and dashes are separators that set off certain words, phrases, or clauses from the rest of the sentence.
- Do not use parentheses or dashes to enclose words that are needed to make the sentence complete.
- Use parentheses to enclose brief definitions and explanations, as well as publication information.
- Use dashes to separate a series of items from the rest of the sentence, to signal an afterthought, and to enclose a brief explanation or example.