

HOW TO WRITE WITH THE EM DASH

By K.H. Koehler

What the—?

The em dash (or em-dash) is used to set apart a parenthetical phrase or clauses in a sentence. In this way, they are rather similar in use to commas or parentheses, just a little more subtle. You would enclose your phrase or clause with em dashes if and when using a comma would seem too awkward or even confusing--due to other clauses using commas, for instance. Use it when you need something with more emphasis than a comma but not so much you need parentheses.

A couple of examples from my own work --this time, *The Devil You Know*:

I didn't think the Truth would set her free, but the idea of Malach hunting her—hurting her—because I hadn't warned her simply wasn't my thing.

While Ben settled down in the breakfast nook with his notepad, I requested permission from Thom Berger to search Cassandra's room. I didn't really have to—police had been through her room several times—but I thought I would be courteous and ask.

In both examples above, I used the em dash to separate a clause or phrase that is closely, and tangibly, related to the surrounding material, but I wanted to set it apart for emphasis. In the first case, to emphasize the fact that the character speaking is fully aware that the woman he is protecting is in serious danger (hunting her—hurting her—), and the second, in order to show that past action had been taken but the character was going forward with his intentions anyway, because that's just the type of person he is.

The em dash can also replace colons, which can often feel too formal, and act as hard commas or even semi-colons. For example:

I wondered if Vivian was into kayaking, camping—all the things New Yorkers swarmed this town for on weekends.

It felt like midnight underneath the dense canopy of trees—mostly pine and big, frothy firs.

Additionally, the em dash can emphasize a sudden break in thoughts or even a verbal interruption, such as—

He glared at me as he stomped to the door.

“I’ll be back,” I said in my best Ahnie impersonation.

“One of these days, Nick—”

“To the moon. Yeah, I know.”

Another way you can use the em dash is to set apart lists within a sentence when bulleted or listed points that might appear too formal, especially in fiction:

It was Julie who had packed our bug-out bag—ammo, MRE's, flashlights, water bottles, and a First Aid kit—and I have to say, I was impressed with her thorough work.

There is one other (and rather unconventional) way you can use the em dash, but it involves style over grammar, and that's as part of a character's fugue state. The em dash can emphasize a broken thought or idea for a character suffering an injury or illness, a technique made popular by Stephen King. An example from *A Werewolf in Time*:

—eliza.

Eliza—wake up.

In the beginning, the world was pain. It was like being born. Light carved a burning path into her eyes, and that made her sad because she was happy in the darkness where there was no pain, where there was darkness and comfort and...nothingness. But now she felt the bed pressing into the bruises under her body and that made her want to scream in agony. She sucked scorching air into her tattered and tired lungs and came up out of the darkness choking and coughing.

Avoiding Confusion

One other thing you need to be aware of when using the em dash is that it is not the same as an en dash, which is simply an elongated hyphen commonly used in journalism and non-fiction to link two words together, such as: A stand-in for versus: the Clinton–Trump Debate, a range: 6–8 weeks

for delivery, to link the points on a route: the Amsterdam–Berlin flight, or an equal partnership: the Times–Picayune newspaper.

As em dashes are mostly about style, don't be afraid to play with them. They are like a writer's secret super power, and you will most certainly expand the range of your writing with them in your arsenal.

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