



TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 3, EPISODE 7
HOW TO USE EN DASHES

Denise Cowle: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Editing Podcast. So we're chatting about dashes this week, specifically the en dash – that's en for November. How am I doing on my whisky tango foxtrots, Louise?

Louise Harnby: Yes, yes, thank you! We're trying to keep this clean, you know! Anyway, yes, it's en for November. So before we get going on this, let's just remind everyone that sometimes dashes are referred to as rules – so en rules and em rules.

DC: They're called rules in Oxford's *New Hart's Rules*.

LH: Whereas the *Chicago Manual of Style* calls them dashes. We're going to stick with dashes so we don't confuse people when we talk about the kind of rules that prescribe how you should do X or Y. So let's talk first about what an en dash is.

DC: Yes, so the en dash is twice the length of a hyphen. And there are several uses for this bit of punctuation, some of which apply whether you're writing and editing in US or UK English, and some of which don't. So we'll make sure to cover differences in usage.

LH: Yes, they're definitely more prevalent in UK style writing.

So the first use of en dashes is as parentheses ... in other words, they set off an augmenting or explanatory word or phrase in a sentence that could stand alone without the insertion. Alternative types of punctuation that offer the same options are round brackets, em dashes (that's em for Mike), commas, and colons ... but it really depends on what you're writing. So an example would be:

- Rudolph – that reindeer in the song – had a really shiny nose.

DC: I wish you'd sung that. Actually, I don't. I've heard your singing voice, missus! Now, the important thing to note here is that when en dashes are used

parenthetically, they usually have spaces either side, as you heard Louise say. That's how it's done when editing in UK style.

LH: Yes, whereas the US alternative would conventionally be parenthetical unspaced em-for-Mike dashes.

- Rudolph—that reindeer in the song—had a really shiny nose.

Just bear in mind that these are style conventions, NOT the law. And that means that if you're preparing a book file or paper for a publisher or journal, check what their preferred style is first.

DC: The next place you'll see en dashes is in number spans, and it's standard in both UK and US style to have no space either side (e.g. 12–14). So in non-fiction – educational, business, and academic texts, for example – think about where number ranges might be found: in tables and figures, dates, page numbers in citations and references, and often in the main body text and headers.

LH: In fiction, it's slightly different. With prose, number spans are often written out, though again this is convention rather than a rule that *must* be adhered to. Still, you might find number ranges making their way into emails, texts, and letters, or say in a report if your story's a police procedural. And, of course, they're good for date ranges.

And talking of fiction, there's a third use for spaced en dashes if you're writing in UK style, and that's for dialogue interrupted by narrative description. So when dialogue is broken, by say an action beat, but the speaker hasn't finished talking, that's when you can use a spaced en dash.

DC: So can you give us an example? I know it's tricky with audio but give it a go!

LH: Yes, so if a character called Denise was asking for another glass of gin and the dialogue was interrupted by an action beat that mentioned her tripping over the carpet, it would go like this:

- 'Louise, pass us that bottle' – her foot caught on the edge of the rug and she stumbled – 'of Hendricks, will you?'

So both bits of dialogue are enclosed in quotation marks but the action beat about the foot and the rug is set off by the spaced en dashes.

DC: Right. Thanks for that! How come I end up in your examples so often?

So another use that I think's going to come up more regularly in non-fiction is the en dash in adjectival compounds. And this convention applies wherever you live. So the en dash comes into play when it's an issue of equal weighting.

And this is important because getting this wrong could communicate a message to readers that you didn't intend, or that might even offend. I'll give you an example:

Take the term 'Asian-British'. If you put a hyphen between those two words, you're subordinating the word *Asian* because it's being used to modify *British*. An en dash here (Asian–British) would indicate equal weighting between the two elements. However, there's a move now to keeping those compounds open to accurately reflect inclusivity and diversity (Asian British).

LH: Yeah, and I think that means that writers need to make sure they're representing those they're talking about appropriately. Subject specialist writers, even those who don't identify with those communities, might well have nailed this, but, Denise, what would you say to those who maybe are new to this kind of issue?

DC: I'd say definitely check. You could end up disengaging a chunk of your readership if you use a dash that signifies subordination. Those little pieces of punctuation are small on the page, but can be huge in terms of identity politics. So do your research.

LH: So here's another occasion where you'll be able to use the en dash, and we're back to fiction. It's in faltering speech, but more specifically when there are fumbled *phrases* in dialogue. Now, again, the en dashes are spaced so this is for UK-style texts. So an example would be as follows:

- 'I was going to tell you – I mean I tried to tell you, but – oh, this is so hard!'

DC: And I'm assuming that the closed-up em dash would be the US style alternative.

- 'I was going to tell you—I mean I tried to tell you, but—oh, this is so hard!'

LH: Exactly.

DC: So our next use of the en dash is global, and that's when it's used to indicate a connection, a relationship or an alternative. So what these are doing is replacing the words *to* and *and/or* to show a connection between two words that can stand alone, and that together are modifying a noun.

LH: So an example would be:

- A good author–editor relationship is essential.

And the en dash is placed between the words author and editor, and it's closed up – no spaces either side.

DC: Or you might be talking about the London–New York flight. Again, there'd be a closed-up en dash between both cities. It's the same as saying 'the London to New York flight'.

Now, the final way of using the en dash is to indicate omission, and this kind of thing comes into play more in fiction, so take it away, Louise.

LH: So in some fiction – and you're more likely to see this in older books – is en dashes being used to handle profanity. The en dash isn't a universal option ... very much a UK convention. So it's used to replace every letter in the swear word except the initial letter. So you could write, 'I told you to F – – – off! and every letter except the F would be a spaced en dash.

DC: But I'm guessing US style is different. Ems, yes?

LH: Yes, though asterisks can also be used globally, too. There's no one way. I do have a really long blog post about dashes. I can stick that in the show notes because there are more examples in that.

DC: Great, so that's it on en dashes. Let's crack on with Editing Bites – the regular bit of the show where we each recommend a favourite resource that we think you'll find useful. So mine is *The Conscious Style Guide*, which is a useful guide on using conscious language for age, gender, ethnicity etc.

LH: And mine is the Masterclass webinars. So an annual subscription to that is not cheap. It's currently 199 quid, and I think it's about the same in dollars. Johnny gave it to me for Christmas, or my birthday, or something. Anyway, it was months ago but I only just got around to buying it but it is *fantastic*. There's a ton of stuff from writers, but also screenwriters and actors too, and I think we writers and editors can learn so much from what goes on onscreen. So if you've got a special day coming up, and someone's looking to get you something just a little bit lovely, I highly recommend this.

DC: Ooh, I've had my eye on that too. So that's it! We hope you've enjoyed this episode. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe to us via Apple Podcasts, Spotify or whichever platform you prefer.

LH: And we've put all the links we've mentioned in the show notes so you can grab everything there.

Editing bites

- Masterclass
- *The Conscious Style Guide*

Other resources

- How to use dashes in fiction: UK and US style

Ask us a question

The easiest way to ping us a question is via Facebook Messenger: Visit the podcast's Facebook page and click on the **SEND MESSAGE** button.

Denise and Louise

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