



TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 3, EPISODE 9
HOW TO USE EM DASHES

Denise Cowle: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Editing Podcast. So we're chatting about dashes again, and this time it's the em dash – that's em for Mike.

Louise Harnby: Yes, and let's just reiterate that sometimes dashes are referred to as rules – so en rules and em rules. That's what you'll see if you're using a style guide like Oxford's *New Hart's Rules*. Whereas the *Chicago Manual of Styles* calls them dashes. Neither is right or wrong but we're going to call them dashes to avoid confusion with the word 'rules' used in relation to directions or procedures.

DC: So what does the em dash look like? Well, it's three times the length of a hyphen. And just like its sister, the en dash, it has several uses. Some are applicable whether you're writing and editing in US or UK English, and some aren't, but we'll tell you when this kind of stylistic difference occurs.

LH: Yes, so the first use of em dashes is as parentheses. Now this is more prevalent in US style, though it's also Oxford's choice too. And the thing to mention here is that when they're used as parentheses, there's no space either side. The dash is close up to the words before and after.

What the em dash does is set off an augmenting or explanatory word or phrase in a sentence that could stand on its own without the insertion. So an example could be:

- Denise—that non-fiction editor from Glasgow—hosts a podcast with a fiction editor.

DC: And at the two points where you heard Louise pause, that's where those closed-up em dashes go. The information about me is set off, and if the phrase and the dashes, were removed, the sentence would still make sense.

- Denise hosts a podcast with a fiction editor.

LH: And we've said it before but, remember, these are style conventions, NOT the law. So if you're preparing a book file or paper for a publisher or journal, check what their preferred style is first rather than making assumptions.

DC: The next place you'll see em dashes is in some fiction. I'd not really noticed this but since Ms Harnby makes it her business to know about such things, I'll let her explain.

LH: Okey dokey. So some authors choose to use a closed-up em dash at the beginning of dialogue to indicate a new speaker. And in this case, the speech marks are removed.

DC: And is that a global application?

LH: Yes, absolutely. The only thing to watch out for is that the dialogue needs to be outstanding because there are no speech tags, no action beats ... nothing that will ground the dialogue in the environment it's taking place in. All the voice, mood and intention have to be in those spoken words.

DC: And what if there are more than two people in the conversation?

LH: Bin the idea. Can it. It'll become a confused mess that no reader will thank you for. If you've read any of Sylvain Neuvel's Themis books – it's a near-future sci-fi series, or speculative – you'll see this strategy used for specific chapters that feature a particular mysterious character. And there are no speech tags, no narrative that indicates what's in the room, which fits really well because these conversations are clandestine and in a secret facility, and one of the speakers is anonymous. We don't even know their gender until late on in the second book in the series. And what Neuvel does is use bold for one of the speakers so it's easier for the reader to see who's talking. But every time a new voice takes over the dialogue, it's an em dash that introduces it.

—**Dialogue spoken by character 1**

—Dialogue spoken by character 2

—**Dialogue spoken by character 1**

—Dialogue spoken by character 2

DC: That's really interesting. And I quite fancy the sound of those books. Thanks for that. Right, so the next use of em dashes is to indicate omission. Now this might be more of a fiction thing but I've seen it in creative non-fiction too. And what I'm going to describe now is typical for US style, though again, it *is* a style choice.

So if the author wants to omit a name – for reasons of privacy, for example – then a closed-up em dash comes after the initial letter. So I might refer to Ms H and then place an em dash straight after instead of writing Harnby (Ms H—).

And you can do the same for profanity. So instead of using the eff word, you could just write the eff, and follow that with a closed-up em rule (f— off).

The UK-style alternative that we talk about in the other dash episode uses a spaced en dash.

LH: Some authors prefer asterisks, which doesn't surprise me because most people can locate these on a keyboard far more easily. And those can be used globally, too. And again, we can include my blog post about dashes in the show notes – it has a lot more examples in it. But why don't we tell people where they can find em and en dashes if they haven't set up keyboard shortcuts?

DC: Good idea. So in Word, click the Insert tab, and choose Symbols. That opens up a window. Choose More Symbols to open up a full palette. Then, if you click on the Special Characters tab, you'll find both dashes.

LH: You can also click on the Shortcut Key in that window to create your own keyboard shortcut. That's what most pro editors do because it saves so much time.

So here's another occasion where you'll be able to use the em dash, and we're back to fiction. It's in faltering speech, more specifically when there are fumbled *phrases* in dialogue in US-style writing. And again, the em dashes are closed up.

DC: So an example would be as follows – and listen for the pauses when I speak because that's where the em dashes will come.

- “I don't—I can't but—oh, what a nightmare!”

So each of those places where I paused could take an em dash and indicate the speaker's stumble.

And the UK-style alternative would be a spaced en dash.

LH: And, finally, the em dash is great for end-of-line interruptions. Again, you're most likely to see these in dialogue. And in this case, the usage applies to whatever English you're writing in. So I think the best way to show this is to show off our acting skills, Denise.

DC: This is going to be a catastrophe but what the heck? Let's give it a go. Right, you start and I'll we'll interrupt each other. And I'm looking at the script now and I see you've set me up good and proper.

LH: Honestly, don't be oversensitive! Now, every time you, the listener, hear one of our voices interrupted, that's where the em dash would go, close up between the final word and the closing quotation mark. Okay ...

Denise slunk over to the bar. 'I need two bottles of your finest—'
'No, you've had three bottles of gin already, Denise. I strongly rec—'
'Mind your own business, you tea-drinking—'
'How very dare you, Ms Cowle.'

DC: And, that's quite enough on em dashes. And just for the record, Louise likes a little gin just as much as I do.

LH: And that's why when we're divvying up tasks for The Editing Podcast it's not a good idea always to leave me in charge of a script!

DC: True, but I'm in charge of the bloopers. You've been warned. Ah, thank goodness it's time for 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 a blog article by literary agent Jane Friedman, called 'Start here: How to self-publish your book'. It takes you through the whole process, step by step. It's an introductory guide to how to self-publish (both in print and in ebook), and how to choose the right services or approach based on your needs and budget.

LH: And mine is *The Magic of Fiction* by Beth Hill, which is just a fabulous all-round but comprehensive and accessible text for fiction editors and writers who want to hone novel craft at story and sentence level.

DC: Excellent. So 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

- *The Magic of Fiction*, Beth Hill
- 'Start here: How to self-publish your book', Jane Friedman

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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