How and When to Use an M-Dash

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Uses

To introduce a series of terms or phrases separated by commas

- The list of singular makers of California gives way to forces of unmaking—to gangs, riots, floods, propositions, stalled traffic. [Richard Rodriguez]

- His pen flew glibly, framing and naming spacious avenues parallel to the shore—Mediterranean, Baltic, Oriental, Ventnor—and narrower transecting avenues: North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Connecticut, States, Virginia, Tennessee, New York, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois. [John McPhee]

To mark a parenthesis

- But it's reasonable to expect—and hope for—an alternative. [Robert Kahn]

- And in their very universality—like the mall, the motel, or the McDonald's outlet—they advance the notion of a future in which all the world's a multiculture. [Pico Iyer]

As an afterthought, qualification, or intensifier

- For twenty-odd years in New York, I never rode the bus at all—not, at least, after a single, traumatic bus experience. [Adam Gopnik]

- One way or the other, I seem to be off-center—or "uncentered," to use the jargon of holism. [Philip Lopate]

- And this makes them unattainable, which somehow makes them powerful—someone that every woman wants to be and every man wants to have. [Gore Vidal]

To shift emphasis onto an unexpected word in a sentence

- They want to tell it all—the all of personal experience, of consciousness itself. [Victoria Hampl]

- I'd always been relieved that my Dad was smart and had gotten the whole family out in time—except for this Tante Rosa. [Gabrielle Schwartz]

Typography

A hyphen (-) separates parts of words: *self-reflexive*

An N-dash (–) separates numbers or dates: *5–7, January–April*   [option + hyphen]

An M-dash (—) separates parts of a sentence: *I was self-reflexive 5–7 times—and that was only January–April.*   [shift + option + hyphen]

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