There are two types of dashes: em dashes and en dashes. Both get their names from their length. An em dash is about as long as the letter "m" (—), whereas an en dash is only about half that length, or the length of the letter "n" (–).

Em Dashes

An em dash is automatically created in Word if you type a first word, two hyphens back-to-back, then a second word, with no spaces in between.

The em dash is an informal, flashy kind of punctuation. It is often used for dramatic emphasis. One em dash by itself can indicate a sudden break in grammar or thought.

> e.g. I just saw him—I swear!

As copyeditor Amy Einsohn points out, the em dash also "prepares the reader for a punch-line or a U-turn."

> e.g. The man was innocent—or so he seemed.

It can also be used instead of a comma to separate descriptive phrases or explanations from the rest of the sentence, especially if those phrases contain surprising or revealing information.

> e.g. In 1553, King Henry VIII married Anne Boleyn—a marriage that would only last for 3 years.

Two em dashes can also work like pairs of commas or parentheses to set off extra information from the rest of the sentence. Em dashes are used in this way when the extra information is long or complex enough to interrupt the reader's train of thought.

> e.g. "My Country, 'Tis of Thee"—an American anthem set to the tune of the British royal anthem "God Save the Queen"—used to be sung on July 4th.

En Dashes

An en dash is automatically created in Word if you type space-hyphen-space between two words or numbers.

The en dash is mainly used in number ranges or date ranges. In these situations, the en dash replaces the word "through" or "to."

> e.g. pages 44 – 48

> e.g. September – April

> e.g. Monday – Friday, 7:30 – 10:30

> e.g. 100 – 150 people

We so rarely need to use an en dash that most people use a hyphen instead. Hyphens are the short cousins of dashes (-) and are much easier to create in Word: just use the minus symbol top right on your keyboard.