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Subject: Dashes

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Here is some background information briefly summarized from the Chicago Manual of Style. If other people can consult and summarize other style manuals (for English and other languages), that would help prepare us for the discussion of dashes at the UTC meeting.

There are en dashes, em dashes, 2-em-dashes, and 3-em dashes (and the hyphen & minus).

em dash (—)

used for: sudden break in thought; indicating that speech of one person has been interrupted by another; adding emphasis or explanation; a defining or enumerating complementary element; before "that is," "namely," "i.e.," "e.g."; before a summarizing clause.

en dash (–)

half the length of an em dash, longer than a hyphen. Principal use is to connect continuing, or inclusive numbers, dates, times, or reference numbers ("1968–72"); periods or seasons extending over parts of two successive calendar years ("fiscal year 1991–1992"); in place of a hyphen in a compound adjective containing an open or hyphenated component ("Post–Civil War", "quasi - public-quasi - judicial body")

hyphen (-)

used in hyphenated compounds ("ill-favored") [contrasted with open compounds ("stool pigeon") and closed compounds ("notebook"); for word division (across lines). the hyphen, not the en dash, is used between numbers that are not inclusive, e.g., in telephone numbers ("555-1212")

2-em dash (——) [here using 2 em dashes]

used to indicate missing letters in a word

3-em dash (————) [here using 3 em dashes]

used to indicate a whole word missing or to be supplied; in bibliographies to represent the same author named in preceding item.

minus sign (−)

width of a plus sign

In the CMS, no spaces are given between an em dash and surrounding letters. That is, the space between a letter and an em dash is about the same as between two letters. However, I have seen manuals of style that recommend adding spaces or thin spaces on either side of an em dash.

The CMS mentions that the em dash is used in French to set speech off (seeming to indicate that the quotation dash should really just be an em dash). It also uses an em dash to indicate source for quotations (although I can't find a rule for that), as in:

Oh, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive!
— Sir Walter Scott

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► “Eppur si muove” ◄