

DASH IT ALL

a tale of punctual extinction and resurrection

hyphen

Used to connect words that are directly related:

high-tech
one-quarter cup
frog-killing fungus
Mr. Gordon-Levitt
merry-go-round

en dash

Can be used to connect things related over a span, like "to":

May–August

And to connect a prefix with a proper compound:

Pre-Information Era

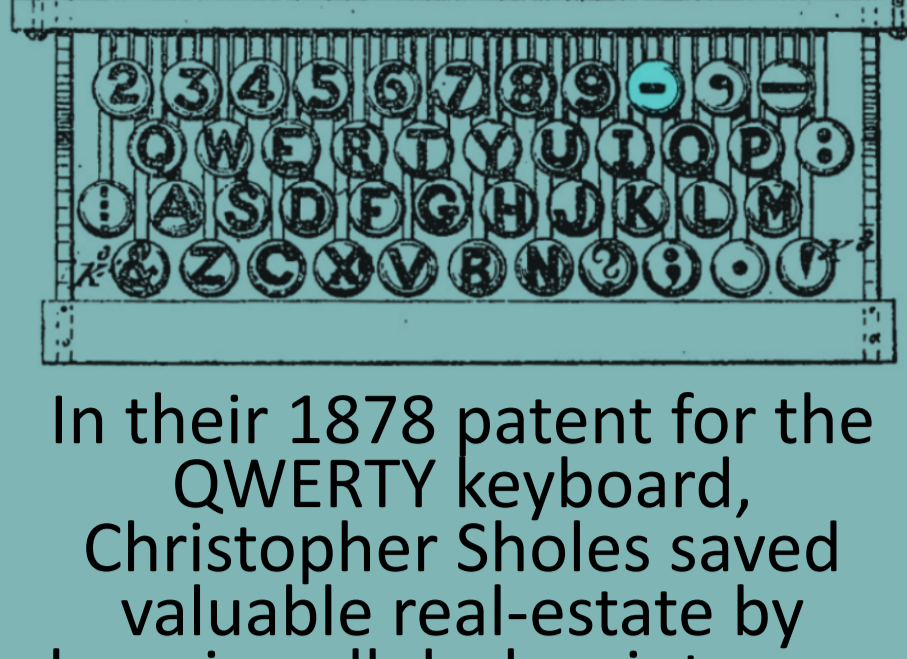
em dash

Use to break up a sentence — emphatically!

Use two to interrupt dialogue: "What the —"

In a bibliography, use three in place of a repeated author's name.

NOT A TRUE HYPHEN!



In their 1878 patent for the QWERTY keyboard, Christopher Sholes saved valuable real-estate by lumping all dashes into one symbol: the **hyphen-minus!**

The key in the upper-right may look like a dash, but is an *underscore*. You may have also noticed the absence of an explanation point — typists were encouraged to create their own by typing a period, then backspace, then an apostrophe (lower-right).

Their names are rooted in **typography**

An "em" is a unit of measurement. Originally it was the width of the letter "M", but today it is defined as the height of a font.

In German, the em dash is called a *Gevierstrich*, from the word *Geveriet*, a metal spacer in letterpress typesetting (known as a Quad in English). The en dash is the *halgevierstrich* (*hal* means half).

In the printing industry, the en dash is nicknamed the "nut dash", while the em dash is called the "mutton dash".

a Dashing History

12th Century

Boncompagno da Signa proposed pausing with the *virgula sursum erecta* and stopping with the *virgula plana*

Though debated, the latter **MAY** be the beginning of the Dash!

1455

Gutenberg printed their iconic Bible. To achieve the perfectly justified columns they dreamed of, they hyphenated words if they had too many letters to fit on a line. They also added blanks to the end of each line — over 30,000 additional metal pieces! This made space for any hyphens to hang in the margins.

1552

Richard Huloet wrote possibly the earliest recorded definition of the dash:

"Dashe or stryke with a penne"

1622

The rise of the Dashtards

Sometimes a comma simply is not enough! Old copies of Shakespeare's *Othello* are evidence of the once proud lineage of the "Dashtards" (a term coined by Nicholson Baker). The **Commash** (, —) **Colash** (: —) and **Semi-Colash** (; —) reigned over the (Western) Written Word for nearly 200 years.



18th Century the Dashian EXPLOSION

Possibly the **Golden Age** of the Dash, this century saw more **prolific** — and creative — use of the dash than ever before!

Most notable was the use of the Dash to **obscure** information (a use still listed for the em dash in some grammar guides today).

1722

Daniel Defoe used dashes to **hide** the identities of nearly all of the characters in *Moll Flanders*.

1797

Jane Austen also used a great many dashes. In *Pride and Prejudice*, a dash **masks the identity** of the regiment to which Mr. Wickham was assigned.

By the 19th Century

It became such a regular practice to obscure offensive language with a Dash, that the word "Dash" became synonymous with a curse itself!

Dash it all!

1879

W. S. Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan) wrote the following lyrics in *H.M.S. Pinafore*:

"Bad language or abuse, / I never, never use { . . . } I never use the big, big D."

1880s

Typewriters become commonplace in offices. Their limited keys lead to a mass extinction of dashes in text.

1906

The Chicago Manual of Style rules against the Dashtards.

August 2nd 1914

Franz Kafka wrote in their diary: "Germany has declared war on Russia. — Afternoon, swimming school."

1950s

The em dash is reincarnated as double, unspaced **hyphen-minuses** -- in **COMIC BOOKS**



1978

Donald Knuth was dismayed by the spotty quality of the phototyped proof copy of their book, *The Art of Computer Programming*.

In response, they built the **TEX Typesetting System**. Its algorithm would compare paragraph arrangements and score them; marginal hyphens were penalized, as were too large of spaces between letters.

MID 1990s

Hermann Zapf pushed digital typesetting further with the *hz*-program. They wanted perfectly justified text like Gutenberg's Bible, but **without the hyphens**. To achieve this, the *hz* algorithm minutely scaled glyphs to better fill a line of text. The patent was acquired by **Adobe Systems** after 2010, for use in the **InDesign** application.

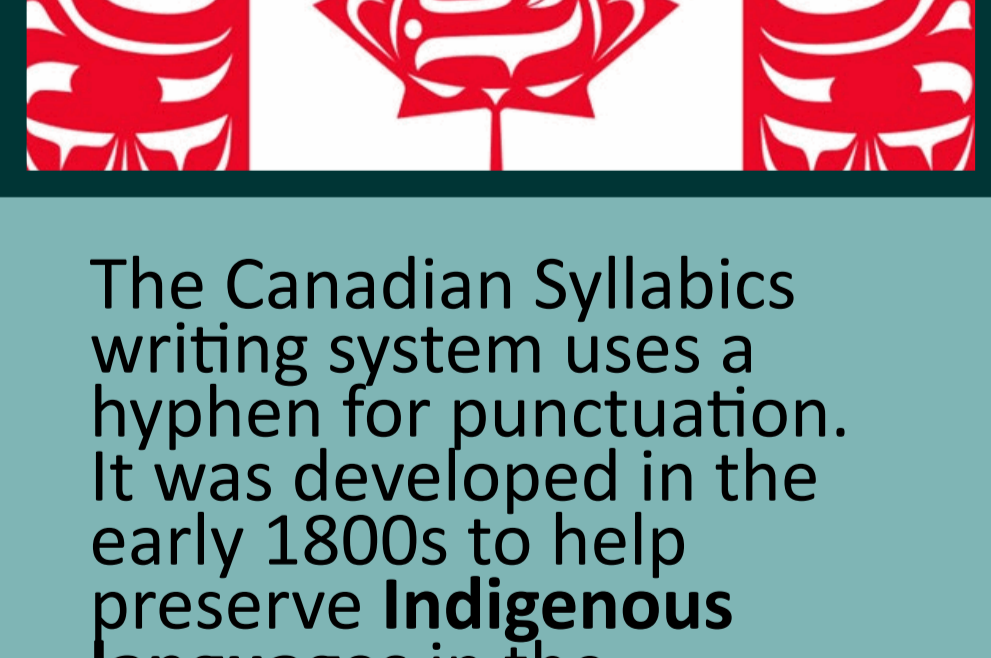
1991

Unicode is released! It standardized how information technology encodes, handles, and represents digital text, and is still used by most digital writing software today.

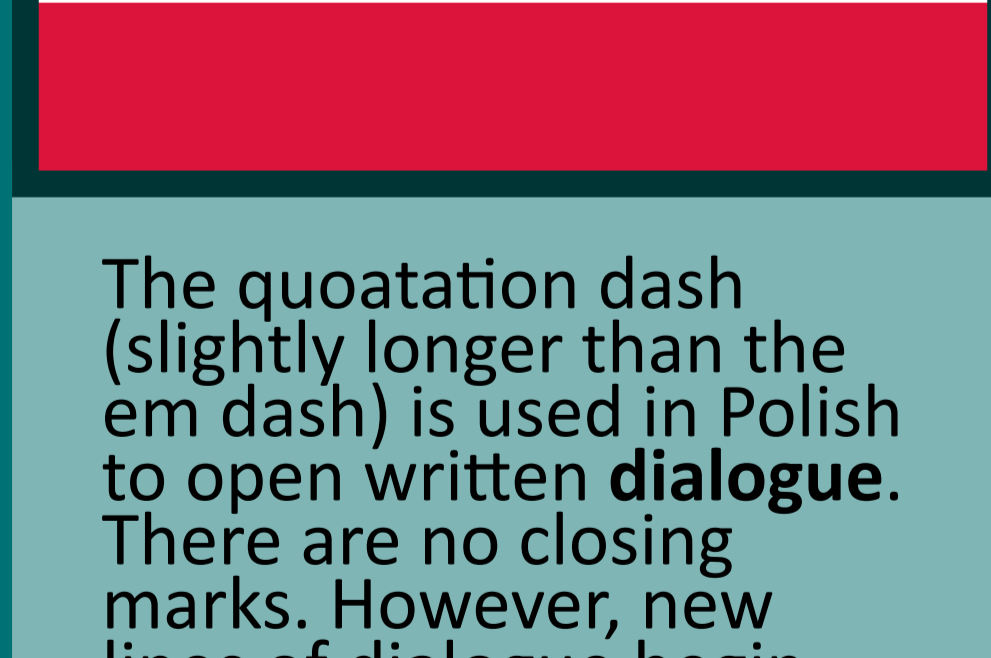
Unicode is capable of supporting over one-million special characters. In 2020, it is at about 10% capacity, including 23 Dashes (in addition to the tilde and hyphen-minus on most keyboards).

Not Yet Dashed To Extinction!

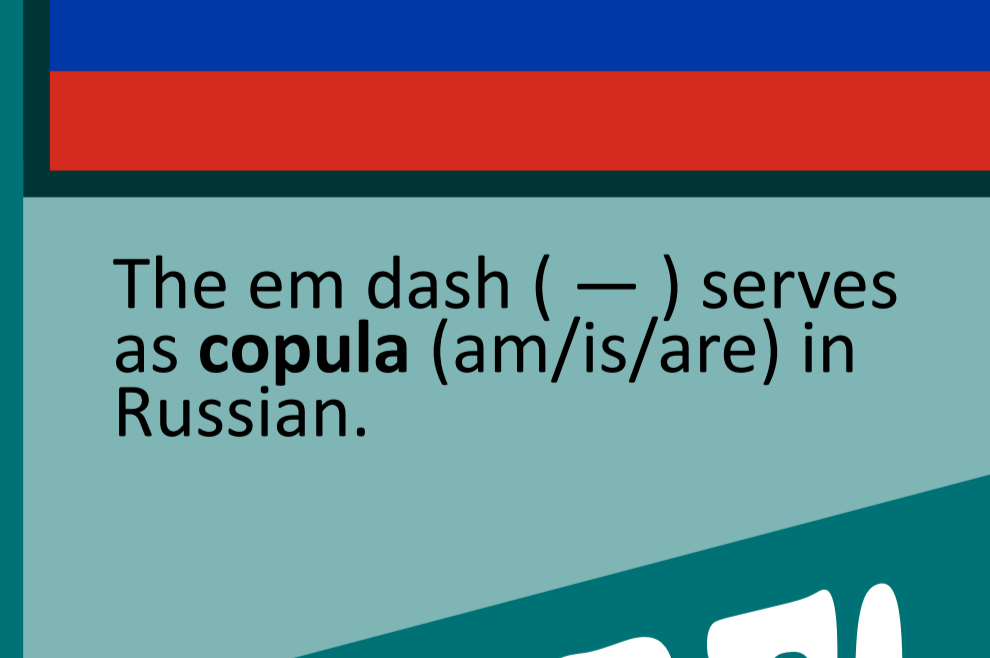
The Dashes live on in the 21st Century



The Canadian Syllabics writing system uses a hyphen for punctuation. It was developed in the early 1800s to help preserve **Indigenous languages** in the Algonquin, Inuit, and Athabaskan language families. Inuktitut, Carrier, Cree, Ojibwe, and some Blackfoot languages are among these.



The quotation dash (slightly longer than the em dash) is used in Polish to open written **dialogue**. There are no closing marks. However, new lines of dialogue begin with a hyphen.



The em dash (—) serves as **copula** (am/is/are) in Russian.

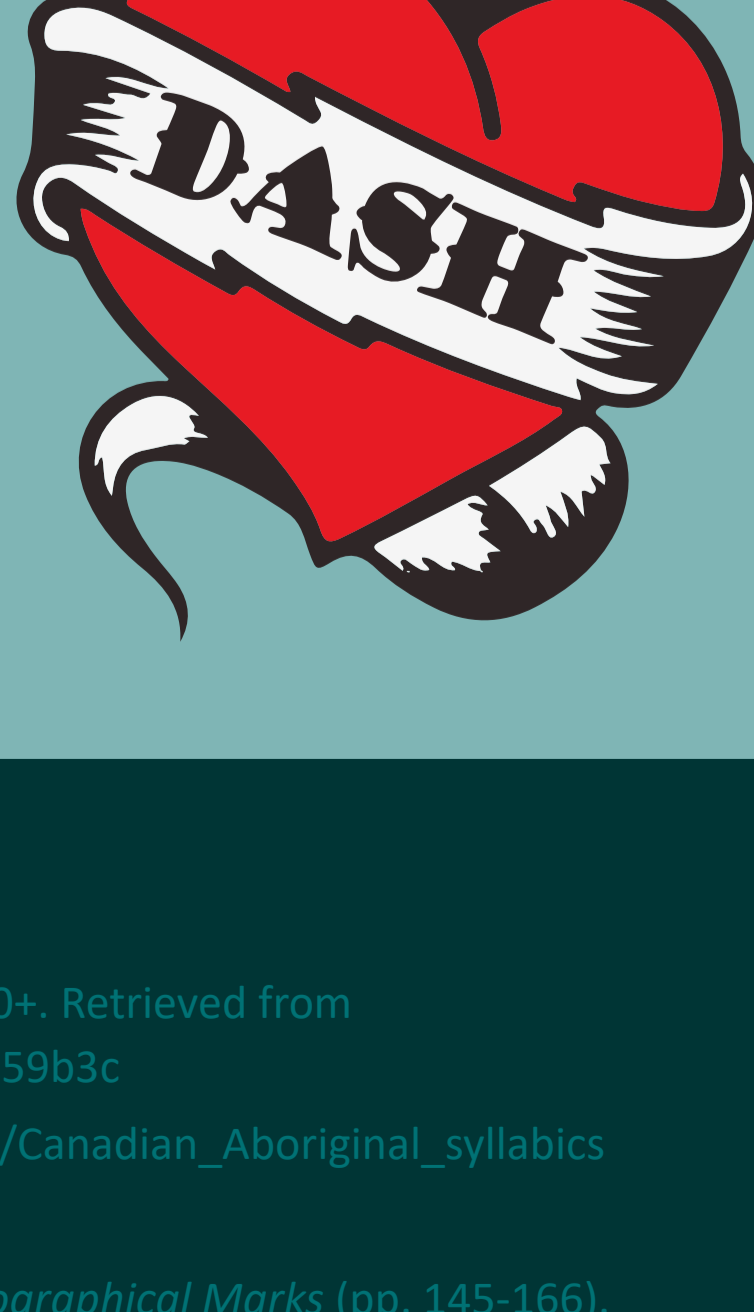
Dashing to the FUTURE!

In the past century, **editors** have hindered the Dashes' return to punctual prominence. Writers are encouraged to use dashes sparingly — certainly never in academic writing!

However, the **technological limitations** are decreasing. Unicode works behind most of the world's typing software, and some will correct a succession of two or three hyphen-minuses into their an en or em dash, respectively. Additionally, we now have the ability to "ink" digital writing with a mouse or stylus (such as I how represented da Signa's *virgulae*).

Writers are regaining the freedom to use whichever punctuation they feel best represents their **voice**. Will we see a resurgence in emphatic writing? The return of the Dashtards? — Will the Dashes take back their cryptic throne from the @\$%!s and ****s?

Have no fear of Dashes. You are now well-versed in their uses and history from the 12th–21st centuries. And if there is a glyph that you need that does not yet exist — **make a dash for it!**



Sources:

Ard, P. M. (2018). Dashing in Persuasion: The Effects of a Pause. *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 40, 230+. Retrieved from <https://link-gale.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/apps/doc/A595143499/LITRC?u=ubcolumbia&sid=LITRC&xid=40b59b3c>

Canadian Aboriginal syllabics. (2020, June 28). Retrieved August 07, 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Aboriginal_syllabics

Grammarly Blog. *Dashes*. Retrieved July 30, 2020, from <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/dash/>

Houston, K. (2013). 8. The Dash. In *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols, and Other Typographical Marks* (pp. 145-166). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Houston, K. (2015, September 2). The mysterious origins of punctuation. Retrieved August 03, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150902-the-mysterious-origins-of-punctuation>

Mills, J. (n.d.). The difference between dashes in the English language. Retrieved August 05, 2020, from <https://omniglot.com/language/articles/dashes.htm>

Images:

Sholes, C. (2008). [QWERTY keyboard layout 1878 U.S. patent]. Retrieved August 03, 2020, from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/QWERTY-keyboard-layout-from-Christopher-Sholes-1878-US-patent-207-559_fig3_23157799

"My Life Was a Lie" from the Harvey series, Love Problems and Advice Illustrated #15 (May 1952). Retrieved from <https://www.sequential-crush.com/blog/2011/01/new-feature-time-travel-tuesdays-1940s>

Additional graphics from: <https://all-free-download.com>

<https://crwfllags.com>

<https://www.freeetik.com>

<https://thenounproject.com>

Infographic by Laura Ulrich