The Dash

courtesy of the
Franklin & Marshall College
Writing Center

The dash allows you to incorporate into your sentence relevant information that may not match the sentence grammatically. This information may be a phrase that summarizes the words preceding it; it may be an appositive (a noun or noun phrase that identifies or explains another noun, noun phrase or pronoun); it may be an interruption that provides further information on one point addressed in the sentence; or it may simply provide special emphasis.

1. Summary

For lunch I ate a cheeseburger, French fries, ice cream, a brownie – all of the fatty foods I am not supposed to eat.

2. Appositive

Those three colors – gold, purple and olive – look stunning on you.
He answered all of our questions concerning his area of expertise – linguistics and communication.

3. Interruption

Students in a similar situation – there are many – should not be discouraged.
To display his Nymphs – no considered to be among his best paintings – Claude Monet added a round room to his studio.

4. Emphasis

International business is the most exciting and rewarding field of business today – especially for Americans.
“My gut reaction is to say that it was luck – or was it?”

5. Another way you can use dashes is in Quotations when the speaker stops abruptly: “Oh my Go—” she screamed in horror as the monster grabbed her by the throat.

Be Careful! It is very easy to overuse the dash – many of us are more comfortable writing as we speak – which results in a broken, choppy language – something your professors would not – at all – appreciate.

Note that with Microsoft Word and other typing programs, a dash is created by pressing option + shift + hyphen : –. If this does not work, then a double hyphen will also work: - -, and many programs will convert a double hyphen into a dash.

Compiled by Allison Schill ’96