Dashes

Are you unsure where, how, or even when to use the dash? If so, here are some helpful hints regarding these pesky punctuation marks.

- Use two hyphens to form a dash (--).
- Do not put spaces before or after the dash.
- A dash marks a decided change in the thought or direction of a sentence.
- Can be used to insert secondary material.

Examples using the dash:

1. Break in Thought:

Everything that went wrong—from the car crash last night to the lost cat this morning—we blamed on our bad luck.

2. Appositives (a noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun):

It was my aunt—the one with the glass eye—who sent the five-dollar bill in my Christmas card.

3. Summaries and Lists:

After the hurricane, the people were in need of the most basic necessities—clothing, food, fresh water, and personal care items.

4. Finale (to give the sentence extra lift or importance):

She has always wanted to become a doctor—and she did.

5. Interruption:

Q. Why did you leave without me?
A. Well, I forgot to—
Q. How could you forget to find me?

6. Attribution (usually a memorable line quoted by someone):

"To thine own self be true."

—Shakespeare

Tip: Sometimes commas, colons, semicolons, and even parenthesis can be used in place of a dash. Unless there is a specific reason for using the dash, avoid it. Unnecessary dashes create a choppy effect.