Em Dashes

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, students will:
• Identify dashes used in sentences.
• Practice using dashes to separate a word or phrase from the rest of a sentence.

Preparation

Materials Needed
• Chart paper and markers
• Em Dashes (BLM 9)
• Interactive whiteboard resources

Advanced Preparation
If you will not be using the interactive whiteboard resources, copy the modeling text and practice text (without the dashes) onto chart paper prior to the mini-lesson.

1. Focus

Explain Em Dashes

Say: Some expressions are used to break into the main thought of a sentence. These expressions are usually set off by commas or parentheses. Some expressions, however, need stronger emphasis. In these cases, an em dash is used. Let’s look at an example from “Earth Is All the Home We Have.”

Model Using Em Dashes

Display the following text on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources and read it aloud to students.

Then we pioneers had to go to classes to learn about the area of the new planet we would be resettling—its language, its inhabitants—using probe data.

Modeling Text

Say: Em dashes are used in this sentence to include a separate thought inside the first complete thought. In this case, the writer wants me to know what things the pioneers needed to learn about the new planet. Think of it this way: If you can figure out where commas might be used in a sentence to separate a thought or idea from the main thought, you can identify where em dashes need to be added.
2. Rehearse

Practice Using Em Dashes

Display the practice text (without the dashes) on chart paper or use the interactive whiteboard resources. Ask students to work with a partner to tell where em dashes should be included in the sentences. (Students do not need to copy the sentences.)

1. The school lunchroom—it was a dull green—has been painted a cheery yellow.
2. Fireflies—I just read this—make what is called cold light.
3. Do you mind—I don’t—if Jill and Marcus go to the mall with us tomorrow?

Practice Text

If your class includes English learners or other students who need support, use “Strategies to Support ELs.”

Share Sentences with Em Dashes

Invite volunteers to come to the chart or interactive whiteboard and insert em dashes where needed in each sentence. Discuss their choices as a class. Ask students the following questions:

• How do em dashes make writing more interesting?
• How do em dashes help you as a writer?

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: Remember to use em dashes in your writing to separate a break in thought or speech from the rest of your sentence. The em dashes show when an expression needs stronger emphasis than those that use commas or parentheses.

If you would like to give students additional practice using dashes, ask them to complete BLM 9.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to share the changes they made on BLM 9. Provide feedback as necessary. Ask students to tell what they learned about em dashes.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning

Write simple sentences that contain em dashes on chart paper. Work one on one with beginning ELs to help them read the sentences. For example: I want ice cream—chocolate—for lunch.

Intermediate and Advanced

Ask students to work with fluent English speakers to write a few simple sentences of their own that include em dashes to separate thoughts from the main thought of the sentence. Provide help as needed.

Pair students with fluent English speakers to complete BLM 9.