
Typographers' Inn

Peter Flynn

Dashing it off III (em rules reprise)

The inconsistencies I mentioned in *TUGboat* 37:3 about recommendations for dashes have had yet another airing recently.

Conventionally, \TeX and \LaTeX use four horizontal lines in different circumstances:

1. the hyphen (-) is inserted automatically by the hyphenation routine when a word needs breaking at a line-end. Normally, you would only actually type a hyphen when you use a common compound like ‘well-founded’;
2. the en dash or en rule (–) is primarily used in numeric ranges like 13–22, but sometimes in nonce compounds (see below);
3. the em dash or em rule (—) is used as punctuation—like this—as a form of parenthesis;
4. the minus sign (−) is used only in mathematics.

Different cultures, as well as publishers' house styles, may prescribe other applications, especially for using the en dash in the role of punctuation instead of the em dash, and for putting space before and after the dash—or not, like that. In my summary of the discussion from \TYPOL in *TUGboat* 44:3 (pp. 264–266) I said ‘So now we know’—except that we don't.

Such differences appear mainly to arise between the US, UK, and European continental spheres of publishing influence, but probably elsewhere as well (outside my experience, and I'd be interested to hear of others).

The use of the en dash for connecting nonce, rare, or unconventional compounds is interesting, and appears intended to signal their status as once-off, such as ‘a Solomon–like judgment’, where a hyphen would have implied an established usage.

Breaches of the conventions can reveal strongly-held opinions, as a recent exchange on the BlueSky social network revealed. One example elicited approving comments from journalist and editor Christy Karras and from long-time \TeX contributor Don Hosek, confirming the use of the en dash in some cases:

- two words needing to be joined which are not an established hyphenated compound (as in the ‘Solomon–like’ example above);
- a word needing to join a phrase which is space-separated, like ‘New York–based artist’;
- a word needing to join a compound already hyphenated, as in the ‘Birch–Swinnerton–Dyer conjecture’ [2] or ‘Smith–Jones–Brown paradox’ [1].

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doi.org/10.47397/tb/45-1/tb139inn

Don also felt the general practice is an unspaced en dash for punctuation, giving the example of ‘Benjamin Dreyer–style punctuation’ but reiterated Cris Maden’s point that I mentioned last time, that Tschichold recommended the en dash with spacing, and it is perhaps worth looking at what he said:

The widely used em dash is a blunt line one em long. This is far too much length and invariably spoils any cultivated type area. The situation could be remedied somewhat by diminishing the word spacing of the line before and after an em dash, but this is easily overlooked.

The only right thing to do is to use lines of half the length, en dashes, and separate them from adjoining words by using the word spacing normal to the line. These en dashes are also called distance lines because they represent the word to in distance or route indications: Basel–Frankfurt; no word spacing is used here. [3, p.149]

Don also noted that the rise of DTP software in the 80s and 90s led to a lot of bad practices becoming common. Christy pointed out that Associated Press (AP) style says to use spaces around em dashes (and doesn’t use en dashes at all) and that Chicago style says the opposite: no spaces with an em dash. Don notes the recent update (18th ed.) says to use en-dashes for compounds of two different people’s surnames (hyphenated surnames remain unaffected).

The recommendations or requirements of house styles are partly aesthetic, partly practical, and partly connected with their origins in the days of metal type in books, periodicals, and newspapers; and Christy noted that if you are publishing on paper, you still have limits on the amount of space, so formatting may be minimal (in the case of AP, at least).

Ultimately, it usually comes down to following the style of the publisher you are writing or typesetting for. If you are doing it for yourself, or if there are no guidelines or styles, you get a free choice, and I strongly recommend testing different ways with the typeface you are using. The amount of space either side of the en and em dashes may be partly built into the font, possibly making argument redundant about whether or not you should use normal spaces (Tschichold), thin spaces (Don, also *TUGboat*), or none at all. If you *do* use spaces, remember to make the space before the dash a non-breaking space — no-one wants to see a line beginning with a dash.

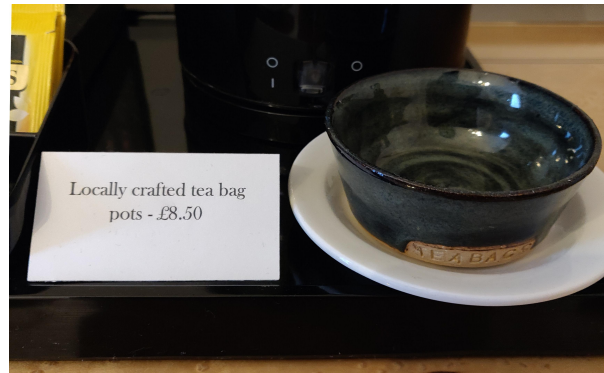
Bookshelves

During the first COVID lockdown, when we were all meeting by group video, I wrote a little document class called `bookshelf` which turned a `BIBTEX` bibliography into an image of a bookshelf using the title and author fields to fake up the spines with random colors and typefaces.

I am very happy to say that Boris Veytsman has come back to me with a load of suggestions, code, and fixes, so by the time you read this there should be a new version.

Afterthought

I have looked before at examples of the problems raised by poorly-broken centered headings (*TUGboat* issues 33:1, p. 8–10, and 37:3, p. 264–266). Another one cropped up the other day while I was staying at a hotel in England. They very naturally have tea-making equipment in the room, but thoughtfully included a specially-made pot for leaving the used tea-bags in, carefully inscribed ‘TEABAGS’. They were available for sale, and the notice is illustrated here. I’ll have a locally crafted tea-bag, please. Oh, and a pot.



References

- [1] J.A. Barker. A Paradox of Knowing Whether. *Mind*, 84(334):281–283, 1975. www.jstor.org/stable/2253397
- [2] B.J. Birch, P.H.F. Swinnerton-Dyer. Notes on elliptic curves. II. *Journal für die reine und angewandte Mathematik*, 1965(218):79–108, 1965. doi.org/10.1515/crll.1965.218.79
- [3] J. Tschichold. *The Form of the Book: Essays on the morality of good design: Dashes*. Lund Humphries, London, 1991.

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