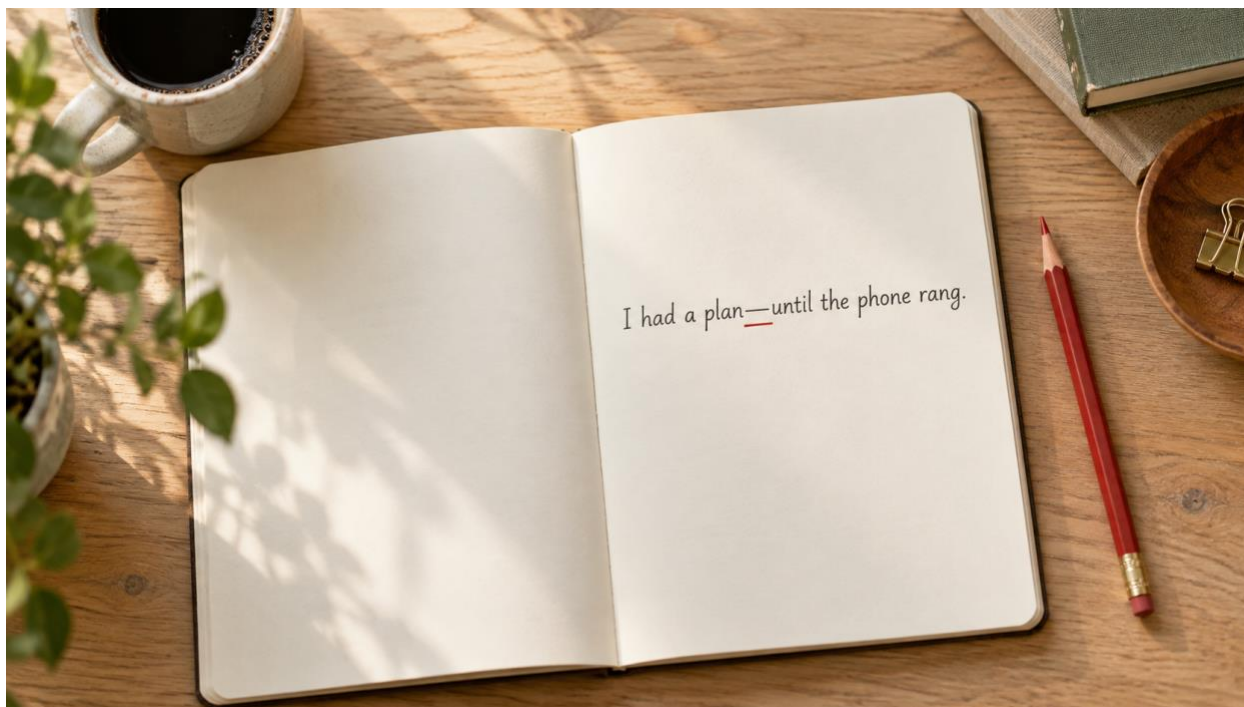




The Em Dash: A Small Mark with a Strong Effect

The previous article covered the punctuation marks beginners use most often. The **em dash** deserves its own article because it can interrupt a thought, emphasize an aside, or introduce a conclusion. Those effects are useful—but easy to overuse. First, know which mark you need.

A **hyphen** (-) joins words, as in *well-written*. An **em dash** (—) separates parts of a sentence. In published writing, use the single, continuous em dash rather than two typed hyphens.

Show a sudden turn

An em dash can signal a sharp change in thought or tone:

I had a plan for the afternoon—until the phone rang.

The dash prepares the reader for a turn that a comma would make less noticeable.

Emphasize an aside

A pair of em dashes can set off information in the middle of a sentence:

Deciduous trees—trees that shed their leaves each year—are common in northern climates.

Use **two** dashes when the sentence continues after the aside. The paired dashes can be especially helpful when the inserted material contains commas:

The proposal—ambitious, expensive, and difficult to explain—needed another draft.

Commas could also set off an aside, but dashes draw more attention to it. Parentheses do the opposite: they suggest the reader can treat the information as a quieter aside.

Introduce a conclusion

An em dash can gather a list into one final thought:

Interested, engaged, and amused—I was all three.

Research, drafting, revision—each stage took longer than I expected.

A colon can also introduce an explanation or conclusion. Choose an em dash when you want a stronger turn in the sentence.

Use it with restraint

Too many em dashes can make writing feel choppy, especially in academic or professional work. If several appear in one paragraph, ask whether a comma, colon, parentheses, or a new sentence would serve the reader better. Avoid adding a second pair of dashes to a sentence that already has one; that is usually a sign to simplify it.

The em dash is most effective when it marks a moment that truly deserves emphasis. Give it that job—and let the quieter punctuation marks handle the rest.

For more examples, see [Purdue OWL on punctuation and emphasis](#) and [Columbia's editorial style guide](#).

Suggested image: A notebook on the same warm desk as the earlier articles, with one handwritten sentence revised using a clearly visible em dash. A pencil and a few light editing marks would tie it to the series.