Introduction
Punctuation is necessary in written language to avoid ambiguity when parts of sentences that run together may confuse the reader. For instance, “The prisoner walked and talked half an hour after his head was cut off” is quite different than “the prisoner walked and talked; half an hour after, his head was cut off.” Knowing which punctuation mark to use can be confusing, but clever use of correct punctuation marks not only clarifies the written passage for the reader, it also indicates intonation and pauses when reading aloud.

Slashes
The forward slash has been used in many ambiguous ways. Mostly we see it in its and/or function. The slash should be used to indicate characteristics of a single entity, either together (the and function of the slash) or separately (the or function).

His studio apartment had to function as a bedroom/workshop.

He had just one room and it served a dual function.

It can be used for separate entities if they are part of a whole or closely related.

Make sure to order audio/visual equipment for your presentation.

While slashes are convenient, overuse of slashes not only might contribute to ambiguous readings of your text but also might indicate laziness. Thus the APA Manual 6th Edition advises “do not use a slash when a phrase would be clearer” (section 4.11).\(^1\) Remember, clarity for the reader is the goal of all writing style.

---

\(^1\) For further help with APA style, from punctuation to parallelism, consult the APA Style blog at http://blog.apastyle.org/apastyle/punctuation/page/2/
Hyphens

Use a hyphen to join words modifying a noun if the compound word phrase could be misread. For example, are “foreign language students” foreign students who are studying language, or are they students studying foreign languages (in which case write foreign-language students).

*The company sponsored events usually attracted a high turnout.*

Is “sponsored” a verb, i.e. did the company sponsor events? This requires the reader to pause to figure out what is meant.

“The company-sponsored events . . .” keeps the meaning clear for the reader.

If “sponsored” was a verb, it would be clearer to write “The company sponsored events, which usually . . .”

Notice the difference:

*The whale chasing Captain Ahab was obsessed.*

*The whale-chasing Captain Ahab was obsessed.*

Both could be correct: The hyphen clarifies the writer’s intention for the reader.

**Note:** Hyphens and slashes are not interchangeable.

**The Suspension Hyphen**

If a base word is repeated in a sentence with different modifiers, it can be cumbersome to repeat the base word each time:

*Full-time and part-time employees and temporary employees get health insurance.*

It would be less cumbersome to write

*Full-, part-time, and temporary employees get health insurance.*

This use of a hyphen indicates that something is intentionally missing, that the hyphens connect the modifiers to a base element that is not repeated.

It would *not* be appropriate to use a slash since the same person cannot have these statuses at the same time.

**After Prefixes and Before Suffixes**

Use a hyphen if the prefix makes a word that could be confused with another word:

*repair vs. re-pair (to pair again)*
3 | Punctuation: Slashes, Dashes, and Hyphens

retreat vs. re-treat (to treat again)
multiply vs. multi-ply (something with multiple plies)

Use a hyphen with all self-compounds:

Self-esteem, self-confidence, self-image, etc.

For more on hyphens, see Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 in the APA Manual 6th Edition.

A Hyphen Is Not the Same as a Dash

A hyphen joins words to make compound words or modifiers.

A dash sets off elements of a sentence—phrases or clauses—that have been added to amplify or digress from the core sentence, or for abrupt turns of thought or interruptions. Dashes emphasize the enclosed content where parentheses de-emphasize.

A dash is a different punctuation mark and is formatted differently than a hyphen—it’s longer (and in word processing jargon it’s called an “em-dash”). In APA, there is no space before or after a dash. For other publication styles, check the relevant manual.

For clarification on the difference between hyphens and dashes, see the APA Manual 6th Edition, section 4.13, or OWL at Purdue (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/).

To make an em-dash in Word, press: <Ctrl>+<Alt>+<minus sign on the numeric keypad>.

For more information visit us at:

coe.unm.edu/current_students/coe-graduate-student-writing-studio.html