Pry the Em Dash From My Cold, Dead Style Guide

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The Accusation

Last Tuesday, a colleague squinted at my recent guide updates and asked, gently — the way you'd ask whether someone has had that mole looked at — if I'd "had help" writing it.

The evidence? Three em dashes. In a 40-page document. One of them was in a warning that deleting a facility profile permanently deletes all of its survey data, which is exactly where a reader deserves a dramatic pause.

Apparently, the internet has decided that the em dash is the fingerprint of the machines. Spot one in the wild and you've caught a robot red-handed — or red-dashed. As a technical writer who has been inserting special characters in documentation since before some of these AI experts could spell "parenthetical," I have thoughts.

A Brief History of Dash Enthusiasts (All Suspiciously Human)

If em dashes prove you're a machine, the literary canon has some explaining to do.

- **Emily Dickinson** used so many dashes that early editors spent years quietly sanding them out of her poems. Clearly a large language model running on candlelight and sorrow.
- **Laurence Sterne** scattered dashes of wildly varying lengths through *Tristram Shandy* in the 1750s. Obviously a hallucination problem.
- **The Chicago Manual of Style** has been explaining when to use an em dash for generations. Suspicious. Who trained it?
- **Every technical writer, ever**, who has needed to wedge a clarification into step 4 without starting a whole new paragraph — or, worse, adding a footnote.

Where Do You Think the Robots Learned It?

AI models learned to write by reading an enormous pile of human writing. That pile includes novels, newspapers, style guides, and — yes — your release notes from 2014.

So calling an em dash an AI tell is like hearing a parrot say "pretty bird" and concluding the parrot's owner must be a parrot. The parrot got it from you, Linda.

And an em dash isn't some exotic glyph only a neural network can summon. It's a special character, and humans have been inserting those for decades. Detecting AI by em dashes is like detecting burglars by checking who owns shoes. I would guess that every burglar does.

The Verdict: Keep Your Dashes

No, you do not have to stop. The rule was always "use em dashes when appropriate," and that rule did not change because a chatbot learned it too. Nobody gave up commas when spellcheck arrived.

If you want real signs that a document was written on autopilot, try these instead:

- It confidently explains a feature your product does not have.
- Seven bullets in a row each promise a "seamless" experience.
- It ends every section by cheerfully offering to help with anything else.
- The conclusion begins with "In conclusion" and then concludes nothing.

So, hold your em dashes close. Use them with intent, the way you always have. And if anyone asks, tell them a human put that one there — on purpose — with a keyboard shortcut and twenty years of practice.