



# A Letter From the Editors

## The Grand Pause: Revisiting the Double Dash

The finale of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* is punctuated by a moment of silence. The piece begins grand and sweeping, settles into something soft and serene, and then picks up in velocity, volume, and tension as it drives the players toward the ballet's climactic end. The music grows louder and heavier as the players grow more and more desperate to escape their plight. Then the music suddenly stops -- and Odette leaps.

Like music, language has rhythm and timbre and pitch -- until it doesn't. In music, this intentional, emphatic silence is called a "grand pause," and we hear it just as much today in modern pop as in classical's greats. In our writing, we create the same intentional, emphatic silence through the double dash.

Here's how to get the most out of it.

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### Use a double dash to add a dramatic pause before a word or phrase in a sentence.

I find the double dash works best when placed within sentences that were already complete ideas without it.

*Every time I step up in the building, everybody's hands go up and stay there.*

*Every time I step up in the building, everybody's hands go up -- and stay there.*

*Stuck in the same place? If you want to get somewhere else, you must run twice as fast.*

*Stuck in the same place? If you want to get somewhere else, you must run -- twice as fast.*

In both examples, like with Odette's leap above, the punctuated silence we've added draws attention to and elevates the words that follow it. We cut the sentence off for a moment and then we bring it back in.

Remember: We should reserve the double dash for big emotions and big hits. When we cut the sentence off and then cue it back in, it should hit our reader with brass and volume. Think drama, punchlines, and U-turns.

*What's peculiar is the song we sang on that fateful night didn't actually sound anything like this song -- this is just a tribute.*

**Pro tip:** Ensure what precedes the double dash can stand on its own as a complete sentence. Going back to our music example, the dramatic pause doesn't work if the musical themes and progressions aren't already well-established. Same principle applies. Plus, this tactic prevents us from misusing a double dash where another punctuation mark (e.g., a comma) would work best.

### **Use double dashes to offset a series or phrase from the rest of a sentence with emphasis.**

Grammar Girl's Mignon Fogarty asks us to think of this as an emphatic parenthetical. If we want to wrap a phrase in parentheses but add a little more "oomph," we can use double dashes instead.

*We can end this war at Yorktown -- cut them off at sea -- but, for this to succeed, there's someone else we'll need.*

We can also use them to prevent comma fatigue while drawing out the series or phrase for effect.

*I keep hearing about these secret chords -- fourths, fifths, minor falls, major lifts -- that baffle kings and puzzle lords.*

In the above example, our suspended series describing "secret chords" is considered nonessential. (The sentence still makes sense without it.) Normally, that means we'd offset it via commas, but, given how many commas are present in the phrase already, this might just confuse our reader even more. Instead, we exchange those offsetting commas for offsetting double dashes.

**Note:** This is the only situation where it's acceptable to use a double dash in place of a comma.

### **Do not use a double dash following a series or list that has started a sentence.**

In a Letter long ago, we had an example using a double dash that looked like this:

*Sun, surf, and sandwiches -- it wouldn't be Venice Beach without any of them.*

To keep consistent, we're banning this use of the double dash. For these structures, **use a**

colon instead.

*Sun, surf, and sandwiches: It wouldn't be Venice Beach without any of them.*

*Beautiful but out of tune: that's what you can expect when you hear a French horn.*

## Use a double dash to separate two independent clauses in a sentence under special circumstances.

There are two parameters we want to keep in mind here: sentence structure and sentence length. We can use a double dash between two independent clauses when they have **parallel structures**.

*It was the best of times -- it was the worst of times.*

It's clear to both reader and writer that the subject and verb placement mirror one another in these two clauses, making the double dash more effective.

Additionally, we can use a double dash between two clauses when they're both rather **short in length**.

*We cannot get out -- they are coming.*

*Sacrifice the queen -- check the king.*

Even in these examples, there's still some mirroring between the two clauses.

In either case, we're writing our sentence with the intent to use the double dash in mind. And if there's one takeaway to all of the above guidelines, it's this: Be intentional with its use. Have fun composing.

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## Quiz

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### Robb Briggs

Robb grew up in a lovable dump of a town in the Bay Area where the refinery hangs in the air, the infields are all dirt, and a \$2 dipped cone from Foster's Freeze is only a five-minute walk from Grandma's house. Doesn't say y'all. He believes: Han shot first; Austin needs better bagels; a constitutional amendment oughta outlaw the designated hitter; it only takes a long weekend to fall in love with a city; in a clean, well-lighted place.

**Main Street Hub**

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