TIP Sheet
THE DASH, SLASH, ELLIPSES, AND BRACKETS

The dash, slash, ellipses, and brackets are marks that serve specific purposes as indicated below.

THE DASH

The dash (–) is used to set off additional material within a sentence, often in order to emphasize it, to set off appositives that contain commas, or to indicate missing words. Sometimes confused with the hyphen, a dash comes between words as a form of division, whereas a hyphen generally joins words or parts of words to indicate a connection.

When typing, use two hyphens together without spaces to form a dash. Do not put a space before or after the dash. Some word-processing programs have a mark called an em-dash (longer than a hyphen), which can be used with no space before or after it. The word-processing program may form this automatically when two hyphens are typed together.

1. Use a dash to set off an interruption that is closely relevant to the sentence but not grammatically part of it, such as a list, illustration, restatement, summary, shift in thought or tone, or dramatic point.

Only one person wears that perfume–my mother.
Three of the people in my class–Tom, Dick, and Harry–refused to join the demonstration.
His feelings for Gwendolyn–he is madly in love with her–will never change.

- Note: Although they can be used in similar situations, the dash and parentheses serve slightly different purposes. The dash is intended to emphasize supplemental information, whereas parentheses tend to understate it.

2. Use a dash to set off appositives that contain commas. (An appositive is a noun or noun phrase that immediately follows and renames a noun or pronoun and is usually surrounded by commas.)

Learning the mechanics–the complex, detailed structural components–of the English language is very difficult because the rules are often so inconsistent.

3. Use a dash to indicate an abruptly unfinished thought or remark. Do not include a period or comma after the dash.

She is a wonderful girl, but–
"Please help me before I–" she cried.

THE SLASH

The slash (/) is used to show a division between paired terms or between lines of poetry.

1. Use a slash to indicate that a choice can be made between paired or multiple terms. Do not use a space before or after the slash.

Catherine is taking the course pass/fail.

I am acting as the secretary/treasurer/social chairman since there are only two of us on the board.

2. Use a slash to indicate the division between lines of poetry quoted within a sentence. Add a space before and after the slash.

Wordsworth's lines, "There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, / The earth, and every common sight, / To me did seem / Apparell'd in celestial light," begin one of his most beautiful poems.

ELLIPSES

Ellipses are made up of three periods with spaces between them (. . .) and are used to indicate that material is missing within a sentence or passage.

1. Use ellipses when material has been omitted from a direct (word-for-word) quotation, whether the omission is a word, phrase, or several sentences.

The absurdity of the situation makes me ponder Hamlet's query "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer . . . outrageous fortune."

2. Use ellipses to indicate a pause, hesitation, or unfinished thought.

The veterinarian spoke softly, "The poor horse is . . . was . . ."

3. Use a 4-period (closed) ellipsis at the end of a partial quote that is nonetheless a complete grammatical sentence (thus including a period at the end of a 3-period ellipsis).

Original sentence:

I have a weathered copy of that photograph in my own personal collection.

Partial quotation using a closed ellipsis:

I have a weathered copy of that photograph . . . .

Note: When used within a sentence, place a space before the first period and after the last period of ellipses. If a mark of punctuation occurs right before the ellipses in the sentence, include the punctuation and follow it with one space before the first period of the ellipses. Do not use ellipses to begin a quotation.

BRACKETS

Brackets [] are used to insert comments or information into direct quotations, to identify errors in text, and to enclose parenthetical information within a parenthetical passage. Although similar to parentheses, brackets and parentheses are used for specifically different purposes.

1. Use brackets to insert comments or clarifying information within a direct quotation. The brackets indicate the parenthetical information is not included in the original text of the quotation itself.

"That disaster [February's earthquake] devastated communities for thousands of square miles."

2. Use brackets to highlight errors in the original text of quoted material by immediately following the error with the Latin word sic ("thus") enclosed in brackets. This addition acknowledges the original error and lets it stand as written.

"Words of great excitement should be followed by an explanation [sic] point."

3. Use brackets to enclose parenthetical information within material that is already enclosed in parentheses, in order to avoid confusion.

Elizabeth served in the role of president (an "honorary" [unpaid] position) because she was sincerely concerned about changing the direction of the organization.