



DASHES & SMART QUOTES

Lesson 10

This lesson might be a bit of a surprise to you. The title is self-explanatory. Yes, this is a lesson about quotes and dashes. I was as surprised as you probably are at the moment when I first read about this. Before that, I had never thought that quotes or dashes are a part of typography. I didn't even know that there were different kinds of quotes and dashes. I only learned about the dashes after I read *The Elements of Typographic Style* by Robert Bringhurst.

We're still in the territory of micro typography. I'd argue it's as micro as it gets. And as I always mentioned in these micro typography lessons: it may not seem as much of a difference at first, but typography is about details. It's up to you how much time you're willing to spend exploring them.

Dashes

If you're like I was, you probably use only one dash—the hyphen (-). We can use that one symbol for anything in coding. A minus, a dash connecting two words, a replacement for the word “to”. In typography, there's different dashes for all these uses. There are five different dashes altogether and most fonts have at least three. The mentioned hyphen (-), the em dash (—) and the en dash (–). There's usually a dedicated symbol for the minus (-) as well but it's not considered a dash.



Figure 61: Minus and the three main dashes.

The em dash

The em dash is the widest of all. It's probably the one that is most misused as well. It's width matches the width of an uppercase letter "M", hence the name. The em dash should be used as an indicator of speaker in a narrative. —*Why is typography important?* he enquired. If you decide to go with that style, you could omit it and use paragraph indenting instead. A more common use of the em dash is to indicate the author after a quote, like so:

This is a famous quote.

—Author

The em dash should ideally be followed by a thin space (yes, there are different spaces too, check the table at the end of this lesson).

Here's how you get it right in HTML:

```
<blockquote>
  <p>This is a famous quote.</p>
  <footer>&mdash;&thinsp;Author name</footer>
</blockquote>
```

The em dash can also be used as a replacement for a comma. It means a break, maybe a bit longer than the comma. "He waited—but nothing happened."



Figure 62: Em dash shortcuts on Windows and Mac OS.

The en dash

The en dash width is exactly half of the em dash width and it also matches the width of the uppercase letter “N”. Again, that’s where it gets its name—typography is very practical in this regard. As is the case with the em dash, the en dash gets misused a lot too. Its main purpose is to replace the word “to”, so instead 6 to 5 PM, we write 6–5 PM. Notice the lack of spaces on both sides of the en dash.



Figure 63: En dash shortcuts on Windows and Mac OS.

Hyphen

And last, we have the hyphen. The symbol that is mistakenly used instead of the em and en dashes and the minus symbol. It’s the default symbol you get when you press the key with the “two minus symbols” on it. That’s the way people most commonly describe it. It’s width is a quarter of the em dash. It’s primarily used for hyphenating words, hence the name, and for connecting two or more words together: fine-tuned.

Smart quotes

Believe it or not, just like it is with the dashes, there’s more than single and double quotation marks. Those are commonly referred to as dumb quotes which are actually feet and inch marks. The smart quotes symbols are the actual quotation marks. There’s no use for smart

quotes in coding. But you should use them whenever you're quoting someone—if you choose to use them at all.

“Don't be dumb”
“You're smart!”

Figure 64: Dumb (straight) and smart (curly) quotes ([Source](#)).

The “dumb quotes” are the correct symbols to use when writing about measures like inches, feet etc., like this:

“He was 6'4” and full of muscle”
Feet and inches

40° 44' 54.3588” N, 73° 59' 8.3616” W
Latitude and longitude

Figure 65: Proper use of “dumb” quotes ([Source](#)).

Other symbols you should use regularly

Typography has a lot of symbols, each with a dedicated intended use. A large part of them were omitted from our keyboards simply because there's not enough space to accommodate all. Eventually they started disappearing from our daily use. They're being replaced by similar symbols. Dumb and smart quotes is a great example. Typography is bastardised these days. In most cases at least. In order to convey our message clearly and separate ourselves from the mediocrity and bastardisation, we must use the correct symbols.

Minus is not the same as hyphen, ellipsis isn't equal to three full stops, apostrophe isn't the same as a single dumb quote. There's even spaces of different widths that should be matched with some of these symbols instead of the default space. There's the non-breaking space which literally ties two words together even if there would be a line break between the two. Here's a list of other symbols you should use to make your texts typographically correct.

Symbol	Name	HTML codes
–	Minus	−
–	En dash	–
—	Em dash	—
…	Ellipsis	…
÷	Division	÷
×	Dimension	×
	Hair space	 
	Thin space	 
	Non-breaking space	
'	Apostrophe	’

With these, we conclude the Better Web Type course. We've come a long way. From the very macro level we descended into the micro levels of typography. This is where our journey ends. At least for now. This course was always meant to be a general overview of web typography and introduce the topic to everyone involved in the web design process.

I will be extending this content and publish it as a proper book. People attending this course will be the first to find out about its release. Stay tuned and make sure you actively start contributing to a better web by producing better web typography.

—Matej

Explore further

1. [En dashes and Em dashes](#)
Article
2. [Hyphens and dashes](#)
Article

3. [Smart quotes for smart people](#)
Website
 4. [Has the internet killed the curly quotes?](#)
Article
-

WHAT DID YOU LEARN TODAY?

Today I learned about different dashes, smart quotation marks and how to use them on the web. [#BetterWebType](#)