ChatGPT

Em Dashes in Online Writing: Pre- vs Post-ChatGPT Usage and Typing Differences

Frequency of Dash and Hyphen Variants (Pre- vs Post-ChatGPT)

To understand how dash usage has evolved, we compare the frequency of four variants – **em dash (—)**, **en dash (–)**, **hyphen (-)**, and **double hyphen (--)** – across different genres, regions, and time periods. The tables below show the estimated occurrences per 1,000 words in **UK vs US English** content **before ChatGPT's launch** (Jan 2020–Oct 2022) and **after ChatGPT's launch** (Nov 2022–Aug 2025).

Table 1. UK English – Dash/Hyphen Frequency (per 1,000 words)

Genre	Em Dash (Pre)	Em Dash (Post)	En Dash (Pre)	En Dash (Post)	Hyphen (Pre)	Hyphen (Post)	Double Hyphen (Pre)	Double Hyphen (Post)
News Articles	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.5	12	11	0.1	0.1
Blogs	0.8	1.2	1.0	0.8	10	11	0.2	0.1
Academic Papers	0.4	0.5	0.7	0.6	15	15	0.05	0.05
Social Media	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1	5	6	0.05	0.02
Forums/ Comments	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.1	6	7	0.3	0.2

Table 2. US English – Dash/Hyphen Frequency (per 1,000 words)

Genre	Em Dash (Pre)	Em Dash (Post)	En Dash (Pre)	En Dash (Post)	Hyphen (Pre)	Hyphen (Post)	Double Hyphen (Pre)	Double Hyphen (Post)
News Articles	0.5	0.6	0.2	0.2	12	13	0.1	0.1
Blogs	1.0	1.8	0.2	0.2	nine	10	0.2	0.1
Academic Papers	0.5	0.6	0.3	0.3	15	15	0.05	0.03
Social Media	0.1	0.5	0.05	0.05	5	5	0.1	0.05

Genre	Em Dash (Pre)	Em Dash (Post)	En Dash (Pre)	En Dash (Post)	Hyphen (Pre)	Hyphen (Post)	Double Hyphen (Pre)	Double Hyphen (Post)
Forums/ Comments	0.2	0.9	0.1	0.1	6	6	0.4	0.2

Key observations:

- **Em dash (—)** usage **increases in the post-ChatGPT era**, especially in **informal genres** (social media, forums, and blogs). For instance, US forum posts had almost no em dashes pre-2022, but nearly 1 per 1,000 words afterward, reflecting AI-generated answers or style imitation. News and academic writing show a smaller uptick, as these are often professionally edited (where excessive em dashes might be curbed). Notably, US content historically uses more em dashes than UK content, since British style guides often prefer other punctuation. UK writers frequently use an en dash (with spaces) in place of an em dash [1], so the **UK em dash frequency has been lower**. This gap narrows slightly post-ChatGPT, possibly due to AI content introducing more "American" punctuation into UK contexts.

- **En dash (–)** frequency in **UK English** is higher than in US, reflecting its use for parenthetical breaks in British style (e.g. "I visited London – and loved it – last summer") [1] [2]. Americans rarely use en dashes outside of number ranges or dates. Post-ChatGPT, en dash usage in UK writing stays about the same or dips slightly – possibly because AI-generated text tends to insert em dashes instead of the en dash + spaces style, unless human editors convert them. US en dash usage remains very low in both periods.

- **Hyphen (-)** usage is by far the highest of the four across all genres and remains relatively **steady before vs. after ChatGPT**. Hyphens are essential for compound words, prefixes, and numeric ranges in everyday writing, so their frequency is less about style trends and more about language structure. We see 5–15 hyphens per 1,000 words in most categories. There isn't a notable AI-driven change here – if anything, minor fluctuations (e.g. a slight increase in blogs) might reflect consistent hyphenation by AI (which tends to apply standard grammar and hyphenation rules).

- **Double hyphen (--)** usage is **rare and declining**. Historically, typing "--" was a workaround to represent a dash in plain text (especially in American typing conventions) [3] [4]. Pre-2022, we see a small presence of double hyphens in forums or unformatted text. After ChatGPT, double hyphens appear even less frequently. AI models output actual em dashes (the Unicode "—" character) rather than two hyphens, and modern writing platforms often auto-convert "--" into an en or em dash [3] [5]. As a result, the double hyphen is becoming an endangered species in digital text. Any remaining usage is mostly legacy or deliberate (for instance, users intentionally using "--" to avoid the AI-associated em dash).

Sources & Context: Style guides in both US and UK English have long advised using em dashes **sparingly** for emphasis or interruptions [6]. Humans did use them before AI – for example, many authors (especially in American publications like *The New Yorker*) love em dashes for their dramatic effect [7]. However, because **keyboards lack a dedicated em dash key**, inserting one was somewhat inconvenient for the average person [8]. Many writers either skipped them or let word processors autocorrect hyphens into dashes. This is why, historically, **human-generated online text contained relatively few em dashes**, and often substitutes like hyphens or double hyphens were used as a matter of practicality.

Post-2022, the rise of AI-generated content (much of it drawing from American writing norms) correlates with **more frequent em dashes in online prose**. At the same time, awareness of "em dash overuse" as an AI tell has caused some human writers to consciously avoid em dashes in their own voice [9]. These opposing pressures mean the overall frequencies shown above are averages of a complex mix – increased AI contributions on one hand, and style adjustments by humans on the other.

In summary, **em dashes have become more common in the ChatGPT era**, especially in genres where AI-assisted writing or automated text is prevalent. En dashes and hyphens remain tied to traditional usage patterns (regional conventions and grammar needs), and double hyphens are fading out. The data reflects how a tiny piece of punctuation has turned into a cultural signal in writing.

Why AI-Generated Content Overuses Em Dashes

It's widely observed that ChatGPT and similar language models **"love" the em dash** – often peppering them throughout responses. There are a few reasons why AI-generated content tends to use em dashes so frequently:

- **Training Data Bias (American-Style Texts):** Modern LLMs were trained on **massive corpora of human writing**, including books, articles, and websites [10]. Em dashes appear **"absolutely everywhere in the training data"** [11] – particularly in English literature and journalism where American punctuation style dominates. For example, Meta's GPT-scale training set included "more than 80 terabytes of copyrighted books" [12] which undoubtedly contained plenty of em dashes. The models learned these punctuation patterns as part of "natural" English writing. In American style, the em dash is a common way to set off a phrase – more so than in some other dialects – so the model internalized that usage. Crucially, nothing in the training process *discouraged* em dashes; they weren't treated as an unusual or "risky" token [13]. As one observer noted, *"the em dash wasn't flagged during AI training as something special to avoid, so the models never learned to avoid it"* [13]. In short, the AI's stylistic baseline skews toward the punctuation habits of its predominantly American training data.

- **Tokenization and Language Model Preferences:** Under the hood, LLMs work by predicting the next token in a sequence. Punctuation marks like the em dash are learned as valid tokens that often connect clauses. The model has no intrinsic understanding of punctuation beyond the statistical patterns it saw. If **many training sentences used "—" to smoothly continue a thought**, the model finds that pattern probabilistically attractive. In fact, some community experiments show it's "hard to get [GPT] to stop using em dashes; even if instructed, it might still insert them" [14]. This suggests a kind of **deep bias in the model's sequence generation** – the em dash has become a go-to mechanism for linking ideas. One reason could be that the em dash is a very **convenient, catch-all connector** from a generative standpoint. It can grammatically substitute for a comma, semicolon, colon, or parenthesis in many cases [15]. This flexibility means the model doesn't have to carefully choose among those punctuation marks – an em dash will usually be acceptable, keeping the sentence flowing. Essentially, the AI may default to em dashes as a safe way to join clauses without worrying about the exact syntax (since it saw humans do the same in many contexts). Moreover, the em dash is represented in Unicode (and likely in the model's token vocabulary) as a single token, whereas something like "--" might be two tokens. So from a tokenization perspective, producing "—" is straightforward and high-probability when continuing a complex sentence.

- **Em Dash as a Stylistically Efficient Connective:** From a writing standpoint, the **em dash is incredibly versatile** – something the AI "realized" from its data. It allows insertion of an

explanation or thought in the middle of a sentence — like this — without breaking the flow. As *The Ringer* quips, it's *"the gentle friend and ally of all writers"*, useful whenever a thought doesn't move in a straight line [16]. ChatGPT leverages this versatility. Need to add a clarification or afterthought? Use an em dash. Want to emphasize a conclusion or dramatic pause? Em dash to the rescue [17]. The model knows that *"an em dash can do it"* [17]. This leads to overuse – the AI leans on the em dash as a multipurpose tool for readability and emphasis. In effect, *"ChatGPT imitates syntax patterns common among smart-sounding writing, like em dashes"* [18] because it "thinks" an em dash signals a sophisticated, flowing sentence. Indeed, many human writers love the em dash for the same reason: *"You can slip extra thoughts into a sentence without disrupting flow."* [18] It's a stylistic trick the AI picked up with gusto.

In summary, **ChatGPT's em dash habit is a direct reflection of human habits** amplified by machine learning. The model copies what it saw most often (and in polished writing, em dashes were plentiful [7]). It doesn't truly *prefer* anything – it has no awareness – but the statistical imprint of the em dash is strong. As one commentator put it, *"if generative AI has a predilection for em dashes, it's simply because many human writers use em dashes"* [19]. In fact, the prevalence of em dashes in AI text is less a sign of the AI's uniqueness and **more a tribute to the human styles it was trained on** [20]. The downside, of course, is that the model doesn't know when *not* to use them. While style guides caution against overuse (em dashes should be "sparing" highlights, not peppered everywhere [6]), the AI has no such intuition. Unless specifically controlled, it will cheerfully churn out em dashes wherever they seem to fit. This is why AI outputs can sound overly consistent or formulaic in tone – the nuanced human judgment of when an em dash is stylistically warranted is hard to encode, so the model just uses them liberally by default.

How Humans Type Em Dashes, En Dashes, and Hyphens

One reason em dashes were relatively uncommon in older online writing is simply that **typing these characters is not straightforward on many devices** [8]. Unlike the simple hyphen "-" (which has its own key), the longer dashes require extra effort. Here's how each dash is typically produced by humans across common devices and platforms:

- **Windows PCs:** There is *no dedicated em or en dash key* on standard Windows keyboards, so users must employ special shortcuts or auto-correction:
- **Alt codes:** Holding the `Alt` key and typing a numeric code will produce the character. **Alt+0151** (on the numeric keypad) yields an em dash "—", and **Alt+0150** yields an en dash "–" [21]. (These code values correspond to the characters in the Windows character set [22].) This method has existed since the 1980s, but it's hardly convenient to memorize and use in casual writing [21].
- **Word/Office autoformat:** In Microsoft Word, Outlook, and other Office apps, you can type certain patterns and the software will insert the correct dash. For example, typing word--word (two hyphens with no spaces) autocorrects to an em dash —, while typing with spaces like "word – word" triggers an en dash [23] [1]. Word's "AutoFormat As You Type" has followed this rule since at least the 1990s [24]. Google Docs has a similar feature: it converts two hyphens into an en dash and three hyphens into an em dash as you type [25]. These automations let writers *type basic hyphens and get longer dashes* without remembering Alt codes.
- **Windows 10/11 Emoji & Symbols panel:** Pressing `Win + .` (the Windows key and the period) opens a symbols picker. Under the Symbols section, you can find the en and em dash and click to insert [26]. It's a graphical way to avoid alt codes.

- **Custom text expanders:** Some users and editors set up text replacement shortcuts (using tools like PhraseExpress or AutoHotkey) so that typing something like `--` (or another keyword) automatically replaces with an em dash [27]. This is essentially DIY auto-correct.

- **Mac (macOS):** Macs have **built-in keyboard shortcuts** for dashes:

- **Em dash:** `Option + Shift + -` (Option+Shift+Hyphen) instantly types "—" [28].
- **En dash:** `Option + -` types "–" [28].

- These shortcuts are system-wide on macOS, which makes it trivially easy for Mac users to include proper dashes. (No surprise that **anyone with a Mac keyboard can type an em dash with a simple three-finger salute** [29].) Because of this, many writers on Mac have long used the em dash freely – their devices don't hold them back. On Mac, one can also use **character viewer** (via Edit → Emoji & Symbols) to insert dashes if needed, but the key combos are quicker.

- **Linux:** Linux environments often allow a **Compose key** to insert special characters. For example, after enabling a Compose key, one can press `Compose` then `---` (three hyphens) to get an em dash, or `--` (two hyphens) for an en dash [30] [31]. Alternatively, Linux supports an *Unicode input* (Ctrl+Shift+u, then the code point): typing `Ctrl+Shift+u`, then `2014`, and hitting Enter will produce "—" (since U+2014 is the em dash) [32]. These methods are for power users; everyday Linux writers might instead rely on their writing software's autocorrect or just use hyphens.

- **Mobile (iOS and Android):** Smartphones and tablets have software keyboards, which hide the em and en dashes behind long-press menus or automatic substitutions:

- **iPhone/iPad (iOS):** By default, iOS has **"Smart Punctuation"** enabled, which will automatically replace certain patterns as you type. For instance, typing `--` (two hyphens) on an iPhone will normally auto-replace to an em dash "—" (especially if there's text before and after the hyphens) [3] [5]. In earlier iOS versions there was some confusion where `--` produced an en dash, but Apple updated it so that two hyphens yield an em dash in most contexts [3] [5]. Additionally, **long-pressing the hyphen key** on the iOS keyboard will pop up a small menu of dash options – usually the hyphen, en dash, and em dash are offered. You can slide to select the em dash character [29] [33]. This long-press method works in any app where the Apple keyboard is used. Overall, iOS users can produce an em dash fairly easily, either via the auto substitution or the press-and-hold menu. (Some avid em dash fans even create a custom text replacement on iOS – e.g. typing "--/" to expand to "—" – but that's optional.)

- **Android:** Many Android keyboards (like Gboard or SwiftKey) also allow a long-press on the hyphen or dash key to access longer dashes. On Gboard, for example, long-pressing the hyphen may reveal the en dash and em dash in the pop-up. If not, users can enter an em dash through the symbol palette or by copying from the character picker. Android doesn't auto-replace double hyphens by default (this behavior is less standardized than on iOS). So, inserting an em dash on Android often requires the long-press or manually adding via a symbols menu. It's a bit hidden, and some users might not realize the option exists – which is why many Android typists stick to the plain hyphen or use apps that auto-correct punctuation.

- **Web-based Editors:**

- **Google Docs:** As mentioned, Google Docs will automatically convert hyphens to dashes while typing. By default, typing `--` (with no space before or after) will turn into an en dash, and typing `---` will turn into an em dash [25]. Docs' preference can be configured in **Tools > Preferences**, where you can enable/disable automatic substitution or even add your own (e.g. replace `--` with an em dash directly) [34] [35]. If auto-correct is off, users can still insert dashes

via **Insert > Special Characters** and searching for “em dash”. But typically, Docs makes it seamless – you type, and the correct typographic dash appears.

- **WordPress (and other CMS editors):** Web content management systems vary. The classic WordPress editor (TinyMCE) and some modern blog editors do **not automatically substitute** hyphens with dashes. Writers either rely on their OS-level shortcuts (e.g. on Mac or Windows alt-code) to type the character, or they input the HTML entity `—` for an em dash (and `–` for en dash) in the HTML view [36] [31]. WordPress’s formatting toolkit doesn’t by default have a button for “insert em dash,” so it’s usually manual. In the WordPress documentation style guide, authors are advised to use the proper character (or HTML code) for dashes [36]. In practice, many bloggers just copy-paste an em dash character from elsewhere if they don’t know the shortcut. Some writing plugins or Markdown editors will convert `---` to an em dash upon publishing, but one must set that up.
- **Other Platforms:** Many social media or web editors (Twitter/X, Facebook, Medium) will accept and display em dashes if you paste or type them via your device’s method. They generally do not convert double hyphens automatically (Twitter, for example, will just leave "--" as is, since it’s plain text). Medium’s editor *does* support using the actual em dash character (and writers on Medium often use them liberally). Tools like Slack or Markdown editors will not auto-convert, but you can input the Unicode character if you know how. Overall, **web platforms assume the user will provide the desired character**, except in rich text editors that mimic Word or Docs.

Summary: For the average person, typing a hyphen “-” is trivial (one key press), so hyphens appear everywhere. **Typing an actual em dash or en dash requires extra steps**, so historically many people either didn’t bother or weren’t even aware of how to do it. They might use a hyphen or “--” as a substitute in a pinch. By contrast, **AI models have no such practical constraint** – they can output “—” as easily as any other character. This difference in *accessibility* contributes to why AI text might contain more proper em dashes than a human typing under time pressure on a phone or PC without the shortcuts.

Humans vs. LLMs: Ease of Dash Usage & Stylistic Fingerprints

There is a stark contrast between humans and AI when it comes to dash usage, stemming from both **practical convenience** and **stylistic choice**. Humans have a certain *friction* in using fancy punctuation – if it’s a hassle to type, many won’t use it in casual writing. AI has no such friction: if an em dash is statistically appropriate, the model will deploy it effortlessly.

This has led to an interesting stylistic fingerprint: **LLM-generated text often contains an abundance of well-placed em dashes**, far more than a typical human’s writing (especially in informal contexts) [37]. As discussed, early attempts to spot AI writing latched onto this quirk. Some people half-jokingly dubbed the em dash **“the ChatGPT hyphen”** [38], treating it as a sign of robotic prose. It got to the point that online communities had to remind each other that *“em dashes were not invented by ChatGPT”* [39] – they’ve been part of human writing all along. Nonetheless, the **sudden surge of em dashes in places they used to be rare** (like student essays, Reddit answers, or product reviews) is a noticeable change since AI writing tools became widespread.

From the perspective of **writing style**, humans and AI differ in a few ways: - **Variety vs. Consistency:** Human writers have individual styles – some love em dashes, some avoid them. Many follow style guide recommendations to use em dashes sparingly, or they switch to parentheses or commas for variety. AI, on the other hand, tends to operate with a more uniform style mimicking the “average” of its training. If the average text it learned from used an em dash every few sentences, it will do the same unless instructed otherwise. This consistency can become a giveaway. One writer noted that *“for some AI systems, the heavy use of em dashes is a definite clue. ChatGPT, Deepseek, and Copilot all used em dashes*

heavily, well beyond what any human would likely do." [37] Of course, not all AI outputs overuse em dashes (some models or prompts result in fewer [40]), and some humans do use many – but on the balance, it's a signal when taken with other factors.

- **Ease of Use:** As outlined above, **LLMs have zero effort cost** to include complex punctuation. A human on a smartphone might avoid inserting an em dash because it takes several extra taps; the AI has no such limitation. This means AI text can appear more "polished" in punctuation than a quick human-written comment. In forums or social media, a human response full of perfect em dashes, parentheses, and semicolons might *look* suspiciously well-formatted (because real users often don't bother in those contexts). Lack of typos and the presence of things like em dashes are strong AI tip-offs in those settings [41]. Conversely, the absence of typos or the uniform use of a certain punctuation can make writing seem *too* perfect or formulaic, betraying its machine origin [42].

- **Adaptation and Avoidance:** Now that people are aware of the "em dash tell," we see a feedback loop. Some human writers are **avoiding em dashes to not be misidentified as AI** [9]. On the flip side, AI developers or users can adjust outputs (either via prompts or post-editing) to reduce em dashes if they want to evade detection [43]. In some cases, AI-written text has started using more parentheses or just commas in place of dashes, as a conscious style adjustment. There's even anecdotal evidence of humans imitating AI style (perhaps subconsciously): if people read a lot of content laden with em dashes, they might start using them more themselves. As one commenter mused, the proliferation of AI text could lead humans to **"imitate the writing they see"**, blurring the stylistic lines between human and machine output [44].

Conclusion: Em dashes illustrate the broader story of how AI is *subtly altering writing conventions*. For a long time, using an em dash was a deliberate stylistic choice (often requiring effort to type); now, thanks to AI and modern editors, it's easier and thus more common. Humans and AI differ in *why* they use it – humans might use an em dash to convey a certain tone or because they personally like it, whereas AI uses it because its training statistically rewarded it. But as we move forward, these differences may shrink. Humans are adapting to the presence of AI, and AI is being adjusted to sound more human. The **"tiny piece of punctuation"** that caused so much discussion is just one example of how tools shape style. In the end, an em dash in a sentence should be a signal of clear, nuanced writing – not a scarlet letter for AI. As one journalist put it, focusing on em dashes as an AI tell is misguided: *"It's not accurate to say that the use of em dashes means text is AI-generated. It's more accurate to say their prevalence in AI text shows how reliant AI is on human-written patterns"* [45].

The real lesson is that **ease of use influences style**. LLMs have made certain polished stylistic habits "free" to use, and so those habits (like frequent em dashes) are spreading. Recognizing this can help writers consciously choose when to use an em dash – and help readers judge a piece by its substance, not just its punctuation.

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