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Grammar

The Humble Hyphen, Paragon of Sacrifice
by
Charlotte White

It doesn't act rough-and-tumble by announcing, "Hey, hold it right there!" the way its big brother, the dash, does. It's neither as divisive as the forward slash nor as hyper as the backward slash. And it's surely not as format-conscious as the scholarly underscore. But the hyphen has its place atop the qwerty keyboard and, hence, in our hearts.

Not to be outdone by the double-dotted dieresis (fave of the faux European set), our mighty li'l hero trundles onward, quietly shouldering the dual responsibilities of syllabification and compounding. And yet, for all its labor, the hyphen still has to contend with the everchanging (once, *ever-changing*) evolution of dictionaryal whimsy, often falling victim to author laziness or reader indifference.

There's such resistance from within its own community, too--nouns who refuse to play well together, adjectives who don't see why they have to be hyphenated to form

adverbs, and prefixes who insist that they aren't confusing in the vowel sense. Then there are the verbs, those snooty know-it-alls who tell hyphens to take a hike whenever they're around.

Oh sure, the quotation mark gets all the glamour and publicity. Prime parking, right next to "Enter". No one can say anything without it being around. It's even got its own hand signal, and it

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the hyphen stepped
up to the challenge.**

can convey sarcasm and irony, too. But it's a showoff, rather like a spoiled child who has everything yet still wants more. And the rest just jump right in with relentless hyphen-teasing behavior.

Perhaps it's the syllabification thing. It's a job that none of the other punctuators wanted, seeing it as merely heavy lifting (or, to put it another way, a *heavy-lifting* job), kind of an entry-level gig that would lead nowhere. Maybe our brave pal volunteered, maybe it was assigned. In any case, trouper that it is, the hyphen stepped up to the challenge.

The two-word generalizations are there (apart for a verb [*run off*], together for a noun [*runoff*]), completely ignoring the hyphen while failing to account for descriptive combinations. Take the popular phrase, "problem solving", for example. As a noun, it needs no hyphen, but as an adjective (e.g., "problem-solving skills"), it absolutely requires one. Ironically, in today's corporate argot, which seems to delight in inverting perfectly good word structure, the verb form would also require a hyphen ("He problem-solved the situation."). So there! Not that the hyphen would gloat, you understand.

We should tip our hats to the kind, unassuming punctuation mark that does its hard work with such awe-inspiring humility. It's been a long struggle, and a little appreciation would mean so much to a good friend.

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