Using Dashes

What is a dash?
A dash is a mechanical tool used to separate elements of a sentence. Though it is quite similar to a comma, it is more informal and emphatic and thus should be used with caution in formal writing.

A dash is used to...

- **Emphasize parenthetical material**
  Parenthetical material is extra information about a noun that may make the sentence more clear, but is unnecessary for the meaning of the sentence. Using commas or parentheses places less emphasis on the material.

  - *Workplace stress, from long hours to fear of being down-sized, is reducing the productivity of the American white-collar worker.*
  - *Workplace stress—from long hours to fear of being down-sized—is reducing the productivity of the American white-collar worker.*

- **Set off appositives**
  An appositive is extra information about a noun that renames the noun in order to make the sentence more clear. Using commas or parentheses places less emphasis on the material.

  - *China, the most densely populated nation on earth, has only about two percent of the land suitable for agriculture in the world.*
  - *China—the most densely populated nation on earth—has only about two percent of the land suitable for agriculture in the world.*

  *Especially appositives that contain commas*  
  Using commas changes the meaning of the sentence.

  - *Her musical talent, genius is perhaps a more accurate word, is wasted by simply teaching and never performing.*
  - *Her musical talent—genius is perhaps a more accurate word—is wasted by simply teaching and never performing.*

- **Indicate a change in thought, tone, or feeling**
  Using commas changes the meaning of the sentence and does not indicate any change.

  - *The naval tour included four ships, two destroyers, an aircraft carrier, and a submarine.*
  - *The naval tour included four ships—two destroyers, an aircraft carrier, and a submarine.*