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THE DEN · ESSAY SERIES

Death of the Em Dash

An essay from The Den, the Fox Curriculum series on AI, writing, and learning.

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The em dash used to be one of my favorite tools, the little pause that lets a sentence pivot, add a thought, or land a punchline without starting over. Then ChatGPT and Claude fell in love with it too, and now it is basically their signature move. Which is honestly a little funny, because it means one of the most useful pieces of punctuation in English got typecast as "the AI one" almost overnight.

This is a post about a punctuation mark having a full identity crisis.

Here is my rub: I was doing this way before it was cool, or suspicious. Educator, grad student, professional over-explainer, my brain has always pivoted mid-sentence like it forgot where it was going. Now I catch myself deleting my own dashes, not because they are wrong, but because I do not want anyone assuming a robot wrote my sentences.

That's a genuinely strange thing about writing in 2026. It is not that AI writes badly, the opposite, in fact. It is that un-customized AI writes so recognizably that it changed how the rest of us have to write to still sound like ourselves.

So this is less "AI ruined punctuation" and more "I miss my dash, and also, kind of respect that it has main character energy right now." If you have caught yourself editing your own natural style for the same reason, I would love to hear it!

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