Hyphens, Dashes and Brackets: Top Tips

1. Hyphens (clarify meaning in words)

Examples:

- Man eating lion seen prowling the woods. (A man eating a lion!)
- Man-eating lion seen prowling the woods. (A lion)

Hyphens link words, where no link originally existed: daughter-in-law, life-like, happy-go-lucky

Hyphens create compound words: burn-out, crack-down, ex-husband, semi-skimmed

Hyphens create compound numbers: Twenty-one, three-quarters, a ten-pound note

2. Dashes (construct meaning in sentences) This comes directly after the person, people or thing/s that own/s something.

They can take the place of brackets or commas to insert additional information in sentences. However, you should not over use them in academic assignments.

Example: The plants are so hardy – they are impossible to kill – that the variety makes an ideal gift for a lazy friend.

Dashes can add an afterthought:

Example: I’ll meet you at seven tonight – if I can get away early.

3. Round brackets ( )

Round brackets (or parentheses) are used to include relevant (but not essential) information.

Example: James Dean (1931-1955) died tragically in a car crash.

Round brackets are also used to enclose details of your source for Harvard referencing. See your module handbooks or the Skills Guide, Harvard Referencing for guidance.
4. Square brackets [ ]
These are used to include your own words within a quote to make the meaning clear.

Example: Only [Miss] Smith agreed with the decision.

Example: It is important to get students in the ‘right mood to think [by] gaining their attention’ (Cowley, 2004:8).

If there is an error or an unconventional spelling in a direct quote you are using, write [sic] after it. Sic is Latin for ‘thus’ and is a way of showing that the error is not yours.

Example: ‘The children did not receive [sic] any rewards for this’ (Green, 2002:19). (Receive is misspelt.)

5. Braces { } < >
Brace brackets {these} or angle brackets <these> should only be used in specialist texts (maths, tabulations etc.).