



A punctuation mark signifying the coexistence of two alternatives.

Indeterminacy. Hesitation to select either one *or* the other. And/or.

A symbol – also called the virgule, diagonal, forward slash, and right-leaning stroke oblique dash – used to separate different things.

The distance between two options is signified by a vertically-oriented line listing slightly to the right. When I get up I'll probably grade papers/catch up on reading. Your analysis is getting the job done, but consider how you can make it deeper/more complex. Breakfast Special 2 comes with a choice of bacon/ham.

When navigating a course provides too many variables, forward motion becomes impossible. Your best option is to just try to keep afloat/stay on top of things.

Indicate your preference of dinner: chicken/fish.

Accommodations will be provided for the disabled/elderly.

A slash is used to indicate a filepath/subdirectory.

Continue? Y/N

A slightly slanted twig at a river's head disrupts the flow of water drifting past, altering its course down a different set of branches and offshoots, each in turn offering its own series of shoals, rapids and backwaters ending eventually in the great swell of the Atlantic/Pacific.

*From Writing: An Online Reference: Use a slash, or virgule, to indicate alternative items. Leave no space before or after a slash used in this way.<sup>1</sup>*

I'm heading out for some drinks downtown, but I could still get some work done later.

I committed to another season at the coffee shop, but that will give me time to think about my options.

I usually just play videogames when I'm hungover, but I'll make time tomorrow to look at jobs online.

I could spend the night, but I should probably go home.

I renewed my lease, but I could still look for opportunities in other places.

If I go swimming today, I might miss the chance to serve coffee to a major producer stopping through town who might be wowed by my innate charm and ask me to consider taking a job writing for the new series he's promoting.

I went out to the French Quarter again this month, but I'll figure something out soon enough.

Choices cascade around either side of a symbol representing division. The paths determined by this divergence cannot be determined ahead of time, so one must simply make an educated guess.

It is important to understand that the slash is directive. Unlike the embrace of the ampersand, which offers a reassuring inclusivity, a decision is demanded. The urgency of decision is readily apparent in the inherent structural instability of the slash, which will lead it to topple over after undue hesitation, rendering any semblance of choice moot.

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<sup>1</sup> *Writing: An Online Reference*, Chapter 33 "The Dash, Parentheses, the Slash", W. W. Norton & Company, p 487  
<http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/write/waor/CH33.pdf>

Virgule derives from the Latin *virga*, meaning “twig” or “rod.” *Virga* is used as well for the symbol of office carried by royal officials to denote their majesty and status as decision-makers. Here also we find the source for the more familiar verge, or “limit, margin, edge.” Both terms find their root in *vir* for “man”.

We thought the combination screen porch/living room was the biggest selling point of that second-floor apartment on Hinkson until summer wore on and the spiders hung nets in every window frame. The webs themselves weren’t an unacceptable presence, but they brought with them the connotation of uncleanliness – the failure to maintain a reliable seal against the outside world which crashed against the window screens in great roiling waves of heat and phone calls and the neighbors downstairs who invited you to join their Thursday night bluegrass parties.

One last summer in town was the idea. Let’s buy some time to think, so we sublet the second floor of a dingy old house. It felt like a building at a summer camp. The bedrooms and hallway were floored with the same hard, light green linoleum your elementary school had. Pretty soon we got used to the moths and the dim lighting and the smell in the kitchen that never went away and the heat, always the heat. We never joined them but every time the people downstairs had friends over the banjos and guitars kept plinking away well after our lights went out. Where else did you hear that sound? Between wooden planks at the river or under the hot water that comes out of the hose for the first few minutes as we spray ourselves off?

We spent the summer mostly on trails that cut through the woods, walking the path to the swimming hole at Three Creeks or riding out to Cooper’s Landing or the winery. The sun made the underside of the leaves glow and we stopped on bridges to put shirts in bags and drink beers. It was a summer of bare skin and bikini tops, sweat and warm beer. But there was nothing untoward, nothing untoward.

Another name for the slash is oblique dash, which is closer than virgule in that it is an action verb, but it still misses the point, conjuring the image of making a quick run for it in hope of disappearing into the brush at the edge of the lawn.

At its core, the slash is a severance – a deep rend, unnaturally bifurcating objects and ideas that were not meant to be separated. The gaping tear carved in flesh by a jutting piece of twisted automobile doorframe is a slash. A swath of wood chips and broken branches ripped through the forest by loggers: slash. The violent and uninvited sundering of private thoughts brought forth by the implicit promise of what you know it feels like to trace the seam of a pair of jeans and feel the warmth underneath with your hand: slash.

As I drive, these are the pathways of potential events that unfold in my mind: While passing a semi-truck on the right, a lug nut which was not properly tightened by a mechanic comes loose and is flung through my window, striking my temple with enough force that my body spasms and I yank the wheel, sending my car swerving beneath the tractor-trailer where it and I are twisted into an indiscernible mass by asphalt, metal, and spinning rubber.

While driving under an overpass, my windshield is struck by a hubcap that has come dislodged from a vehicle on the highway above, which causes it to dissolve into countless pieces that are still held together in an opaque web by the shatter-proof film, leaving me unable to see the road ahead and – in my panic – leading me to swerve off the road and into a ravine where my airbag does little good, if any.

While driving on a deserted road at night I look up from adjusting the radio just in time to see a large deer before my vehicle collides with it, which would not be a problem since I was only going about 45 miles per hour, but I'm chewing gum at the time and the impact has now lodged it in my throat and there is no one around to perform the Heimlich maneuver so I slowly asphyxiate as my car gently rolls forward under the motivation of Drive.

A solitary unremarkable spermatozoon finds itself riding the crest of the first, emphatic surge of genetic matter. Effortlessly propelled to the mouth of the cervix, and avoiding wrong turns and obstacles that hinder its fellows it meanders a course that descends upon the thinnest point of the cellular membrane, which happens to respond readily to its advance, instigating a gestation that will introduce into the world a well-liked leader in the community/a desperate, desolate loner.

The imagination can be slashed when reality is found not to conform with perception. What presents once as a menu of options scatters, chimera-like when looked at head on. The fragments lurk at the margins of vision, illuminating the cold uncaring alternatives that remain.

The summer ends in a pickup truck, fully loaded and headed west. Halfway there a shower curtain pulls loose and inflates in the rearview mirror. A teal parachute unfurls in the wind, straining back toward the point of origin. In the rearview mirror he sees it reach back out of sight, a slick plastic umbilicus containing so many things that haven't been finished, words that haven't been said. The parking brake is set and it is all stuffed back into a box and taped securely in place on the side of the highway, hazard lights softly clicking. It doesn't all fit quite right, but there are things to be tended to before the day gets too late.

Is it a coincidence that all the best playground equipment represents itself as a slash? We ride to the bottom of the slash, not reconstructing the other directions it might have taken us, but rather embracing the cushion of sand, or woodchips, or shredded tires waiting for us at the bottom, and hopefully remembering that the ride itself is really the fun part. We reach the apex of a swing and realize we are propelled by the momentum of forward-thinking slash – momentarily though, before another slash forms to move us in the other direction, only to repeat as long as we keep pumping our legs (or getting a push from a friend). The seesaw can also resemble a slash, but don't be fooled. The implication of this device is a constant repetition of ups and downs, and occasional balance when burdens are equal, and occasional sudden plummets when circumstances elect to guilefully withdraw their support in the name of a laugh.

(The merry-go-round is admittedly not reminiscent of the slash, but I would caution anyone to avoid such circular pursuits in the first place.)

*From the sixth edition of the APA Publication Manual:*

*When is it wrong and/or inappropriate to use a slash mark?*

*Do not use a slash (also called a virgule, solidus, or shall):*

- *when a phrase would be clearer*
- *for simple comparisons. Use a hyphen or short dash instead.*
- *more than once to express compound units.*

I didn't want you to find out this way/ever. I knew it was wrong but I just couldn't/didn't control myself. I don't know what to tell you; I'm still in love with you/her. I wanted to be nice and just be her friend, but I guess I was being naïve/cynical. I regret doing this/being caught more than anything I've ever done before. I understand that she/you and I can't see each other anymore. All I care about is that I still have you/someone.

Slash can also be a vulgar term for female genitalia. This seems odd, considering that in terms of both structure and function the slash is far more reminiscent of an erect penis (the employment of which can even in pleasant circumstances often result in bleeding, pain, and lifelong separation).

The tongue slashes breath as it escapes the mouth, shaping currents of air into different sounds that cannot be any other sound. The audible exhalation forms symbols that are interpreted as ideas, again slashed away from the infinite other ideas now drifting formless among the humidity and nighttime insects. These ideas do not vibrate a copper plate to be translated into radio waves, sent into the atmosphere and delivered somewhere else to be retranslated into vibrations emanating from a new copper plate and into a human ear. They have been slashed down by the idea preceding and can never be returned to. They existed only in the realm of the potential.

## *Mars/Ares*

I once read that early written Latin had no lowercase letters, spaces, or punctuation. Would this imply that Roman society had no notion of the slash? Perhaps that assumes too much, but there is a certain internal logic to support the notion. The mighty technological advancements of Rome, the overawing cultural and military superiority of *imperium* certainly indicate a people defined by decision and directedness, not pausing at every branch in the road to contemplate East/West. Simply contemplate the magnitude of the aqueducts thrown up over hundreds of miles for one purpose: to move water *forward*. Ever forward and on to greater purpose! Small wonder it was such a minor effort once their minds were made up to incorporate and absorb Greece, home of democracy, philosophy, and surely countless other traditions in which the notion of either/or was suffused throughout the national character.

And what do we know of the demise of Rome? Why, decay of course! It is the story of the stagnation and dissolution of a culture that allowed its unifying ideas and driving forces to be jimmed apart by all the spectral enervations contained within that divisive, impermeable bit of punctuation.

Or was it rather ossification? A society ground to a halt by a failure of curiosity and unwillingness to contemplate ideas for their own sake?

Is the slash, then, a product or cause of the Dark Ages? Well, this is a decision for historians to ponder, but regardless of the answer it should be rather evident at this point why the slash has such violent connotations.

All slashes are erotic.

I have decided to craft a life for myself in the woods. I shall find a place if not unexplored then at least undisturbed, where documents, passports and social security numbers lose all meaning. Perhaps the Canadian Shield. In this place I will settle down. What money I have can go to buying canned goods and gas for my lantern. My meager savings will last a long time when I have no need for taxes or rent. Most of my food will come from my surroundings. Corn and tomatoes take time to grow but berries and rabbit are plentiful where I am going. I know that it is not my land, but I will walk far enough that where I settle will not be disturbed. The stream nearby will provide me water. Perhaps I will get sick, but in these times I will lay beneath the furs I have collected, and gather my strength and it will pass. If by chance I am to be discovered I will make my peace with those who come across me, and in the morning gather my belongings – knife, axe, lantern, canteen – and travel further. Farther and farther north.

I will pass by deer who arrest their grazing at my passage to bound away into the pines. Bears will snuffle at the spilled oil around my campfire and bull moose will challenge me for mastery of a clearing. I will learn to live with these new neighbors of mine. Some I will take as food, while others may seek me as the same. Ultimately we shall find a way to coexist. Or perhaps we shall not, but in that case there will be no one around to regret it.

My beard will grow and my skin will dry out and separate. The snow and ice that serve as society's bane will be my embrace. The winter months will find me huddled by the fire, tracing patterns and shaping wood, with little worry for what has come before or what will proceed. For shelter I will take my axe to felled logs I find in the wood. Some perhaps will be rotten and I will be forced to make a home from the living trees of the forest. This indeed is a regret, but their lives will continue in the warmth and security they provide for me. To shape this home I will use my axe, and with each stroke I will know I separate the wood that is from that which is no more. I shall slash and slash and slash again.