

Essay on Ellipsis

This article is something that I wrote around the turn of the Millennium. Yeah, really — it was that long ago. I think I made the last significant revision in 2016. I am currently working on a new revision, which I hope to finish sometime in the next few weeks. I will replace this older version when I have the newer one ready.

Mainly the article needs some structural reorganization to make everything easier to follow. The instruction will remain essentially the same.

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Ellipsis

FOR OMISSIONS, FOR DIALOGUE

Ellipsis for Omissions

This article treats the subject of ellipsis in general, and any writer may find it useful. Nonfiction writers often need to quote portions of text but also want to cut out the irrelevant material. That is where ellipsis comes in. Writers use ellipsis dots to indicate omissions in the text that they quote. One purpose of this article is to cover the more important principles of using ellipsis to indicate omitted text.

Ellipsis for Dialogue

However, ellipsis has another use, unrelated to the first. This other use is to indicate hesitancy, pausing, or trailing off in dialogue in novels, plays, and screenplays. Sometimes I read manuscripts for people — usually screenplays — and I have discovered that writers almost always handle ellipsis in dialogue incorrectly.

My primary motivation in writing this article was to create a fairly simple guide to show playwrights and screenwriters how to handle those little dots that they scatter through the dialogue paragraphs of their works. Novelists make the same mistakes, but my experience has been that they do not use ellipsis as much in their dialogue. By contrast, screenwriters love to drop those dots everywhere to provide hints about how to read their lines of dialogue. In actuality, most of these instances of ellipsis in dialogue are entirely unnecessary. Readers and actors can usually automatically infer the rhythm and meaning of a line. In some rare instances, though, ellipsis can be helpful.

Because I realize that almost nobody is going to want to read something technical, I have done my best to keep the discussion basic and clear. I thought that I would start with some examples of correct and incorrect use of ellipsis dots in scripts for stage and screen. Readers who are only interested in ellipsis for stage and screen can then skip to the later section ELLIPSIS IN SCREENPLAYS. I suggest looking at the examples first. Any reference to «stage» or to «screen» applies to scripts for both.

EXAMPLES

Stage and Screen

All the examples are meant to be excerpts from dialogue in scripts. I will comment on each, as necessary, immediately after the example.

Example (wrong)

With all his fame and money... he is
still the same nice person.

The use of ellipsis above is the way that screenwriters use it at least 95 percent of the time. However, it is not correct. A three-dot group should never appear without a space before the group. The correct form appears in the next example.

Example (correct)

With all his fame and money ... he is
still the same nice person.

Example (wrong)

With all his fame and money.... he is
still the same nice person.

This is incorrect, because a four-dot ellipsis should only follow a complete sentence, and here it follows a phrase.

Example (correct)

You look strange today.... What's
wrong with you?

The four-dot group is correct, because the text before it («You look strange today») is a complete sentence. It can take a period plus the three ellipsis dots. By the way, when the three-dot group is used with a preceding mark of punctuation, like a period, you should not put a space before the dot group.

However, the same dialogue can be handled as in the next example.

Example (correct, maybe preferable)

You look strange today ... What's
wrong with you?

The purpose of ellipsis in dialogue is always to show pausing or hesitancy or trailing off in speech. It is simpler to join parts of dialogue with three dots, without regard to the grammatical status of the parts. Overall, this is probably a better way to handle ellipsis in dialogue, because the sentences look less cluttered. Also, it is a fact that some writers have trouble in determining whether something is grammatically complete, and sometimes the issue of grammatical completeness is arguable.

The three-dot group may look a little strange because of the space before and after the group. But that is because Courier is a monospaced font without spaces between the dots. If the script were to be published in a different font, like Georgia, with normal ellipsis spacing, it would look natural:

You look strange today . . . What's
wrong with you?

Example (wrong)

I need to think about it. Maybe...

The three-dot group should always have a space before it.

Example (correct)

I need to think about it. Maybe ...

The three-dot ellipsis is appropriate for any ellipsis in a script. It must always have a space before the dot group (unless it follows another mark of punctuation, such as a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point). At the end of a paragraph, use a nonbreaking space before the dot group to avoid inappropriate line wrapping as in the following.

Example (correct, but needs nonbreaking space)

I ought to think about it. Maybe
...

You do not ever want a dot group sitting by itself on a final line of a dialogue paragraph.

Example (correct)

What is wrong?... Tell me ... I need to think about it.
Maybe ...

The <?...> is correctly used. Notice that no space comes before the dot group. The reason for no space is that the question mark and the dots form a unit. Someone asks a question (use a question mark). The speaker asking the question then pauses (use ellipsis).

USES OF ELLIPSIS

Ellipsis has two uses. It shows that text has been omitted, or it indicates a pause or a break in speech without completion.

Omission of Text

Ellipsis, which is the omission of a portion of quoted text, is an important device in scholarly, scientific, and other literary work because the writer often needs to quote from a source without including irrelevant material and extraneous phrases.

Pause in Speech or Incomplete Speech

Ellipsis may also indicate a pause or an interruption in dialogue in a literary work. This kind of ellipsis does not conform exactly with the principles behind ellipsis for omission

of text in standard writing. For further discussion of dramatic ellipsis, see the section below on *Ellipsis in Screenplays*.

Two Methods of Ellipsis

Two methods are available for handling ellipsis. The Standard Method, which is more formal and complicated, is almost obligatory for scholarly and other nonfiction works. The Alternate Method is simpler, and some version of it is common in dramatic works and in serious nonfiction that does not have to meet the standards of pedantry. This article presents both methods.

THE 'STANDARD' METHOD OF ELLIPSIS

3-Dot and 4-Dot Ellipsis

The Standard Method distinguishes between 3-dot and 4-dot ellipsis. The general principle of the Standard Method is to use 3-dot ellipsis for omissions inside a sentence but 4-dot ellipsis for omissions at the end of any text that remains a grammatically complete sentence after the end is chopped off.

Four-dot (or 4-character) ellipsis includes not only four dots but also three dots used with another punctuation mark (such as an exclamation point, a question mark, a colon, a comma, or a semicolon). Examples of 4-dot or 4-character ellipsis:

....
 ! ... and ...!
 ? ... and ...?
 : ... and ...:
 ; ... and ...;

In standard manuscript preparation and printing, you need a space between the characters inside the ellipsis group, because the font is typically a proportionally spaced font and three or four dots with no space would look cramped. Moreover, the spaces must be nonbreaking spaces (more on this later). If you do not use nonbreaking spaces, then sooner or later you will have a typographic disaster: An ellipsis group will fall at the end of a line, and part of it will wrap to the next line. You will have something like:

and that is how it ended. .
 ..

With nonbreaking spaces, this kind of thing does not happen.

Ellipsis within a Sentence

The ellipsis should consist of three dots, spaces between the dots, and spaces surrounding the dot group.

Original

Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon in England.

With ellipsis

Shakespeare was born . . . in England.

Bad forms may have the wrong number of dots, or no space between dots, or improper spacing around the dot group.

Bad forms

Shakespeare was born...in England.

(Dot group lacks all spacing.)

Shakespeare was born. . .in England.

(Dots have spaces between them, but the group lacks spaces at start and end of group.)

Shakespeare was born. . . in England.

(Dot group needs a space before it.)

Shakespeare was born. . . .in England.

(Group should be three dots with spaces within and around group.)

Shakespeare was born. . . . in England.

(Group should be three dots with spaces within and around group.)

Interior Punctuation with Ellipsis

Generally it serves no good purpose to retain punctuation that came before ellipsis within a sentence. The writer should consider each case for its individual needs:

Original

In a famous pamphlet that circulated widely, some contemporary writers criticized English table manners and other English habits.

Correct but messy (the comma adds nothing valuable)

In a famous pamphlet that circulated widely, . . . writers criticized English table manners and other English habits.

Correct and less distracting

In a famous pamphlet that circulated widely . . . writers criticized English table manners and other English habits.

Ellipsis at the End of a Sentence

If the ellipsis comes at the end of a grammatically complete unit, three dots indicate the ellipsis, and the dot group is followed by the terminal punctuation of the original text (which may be another dot). The following example demonstrates the various principles:

Original

Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon in England. As a young man, he went to London, maybe took some odd jobs here and there, and soon became a prominent actor and playwright. He was also a shareholder in the Globe theater, where his plays were performed. Don't you think those are good accomplishments for a small-town boy?

With ellipsis

Shakespeare was born . . . in Stratford-on-Avon in England. As a young man, he went to London . . . and soon became a prominent actor and playwright. He was also a shareholder in the Globe theater. . . . Don't you think those are good accomplishments. . . ?

The terminal ellipsis has four dots (three for the ellipsis and a final dot for the period itself) or three dots and a question mark. The first dot has no space before it. The other punctuation marks in the ellipsis have spaces separating them. An exclamation mark would work just as the question mark does.

NOTE: An older edition of the Chicago Manual of Style stated clearly that the terminal punctuation of the original sentence should come immediately after the truncated sentence and be followed by the ellipsis dots. Consequently, the last truncated sentence in the example above would be:

Acceptable

Don't you think those are good accomplishments? . . .

So which is correct? I am going to rule that either method is acceptable, but of course the writer should use only one of the methods in a particular work.

THE 'ALTERNATE' METHOD OF ELLIPSIS

Three Dots between Text

The Alternate Method is a simpler approach to ellipsis. It uses three dots in all instances of any text deleted from the interior of a sentence, or between sentences. An older edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (the 14th edition, 1994) approved this Alternate Method as long as the writer used it consistently. Although that approval has disappeared without comment in a more recent edition of the Manual (thank you for nothing, pedants of the nation), I think that the Alternate Method makes good sense. Besides its appeal from an aesthetic viewpoint, it is easier for people who have a difficult

time in trying to apply the Standard Method. Here are some examples of the Alternate Method.

Original

He was also a shareholder in the Globe theater, where his plays were performed. Don't you think those are good accomplishments for a small-town boy?

With ellipsis

He was also a shareholder in the Globe theater . . . Don't you think those are good accomplishments for a small-town boy?

(The abbreviated version left out 'where his plays were performed', but the resulting text still consists of two complete sentences. The Alternate Method allows the two sentences to be connected with a 3-dot group. It leaves out the terminal period.)

Text Deleted at the End of Material

When text is omitted at the end of a quotation, the Alternate Method is like the Standard Method: You need to show termination by using four dots (or three dots and a question mark or an exclamation point).

Original

Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon in England. As a young man, he went to London, maybe took some odd jobs here and there, and soon became a prominent actor and playwright. He was also a shareholder in the Globe theater, where his plays were performed. Don't you think those are good accomplishments for a small-town boy?

With Ellipsis

Shakespeare was born . . . in Stratford-on-Avon in England. As a young man, he went to London . . . and soon became a prominent actor and playwright. He was also a shareholder in the Globe theater . . . Don't you think those are good accomplishments. . . ?

Acceptable

He was also a shareholder in the Globe theater . . . Don't you think those are good accomplishments? . . .

(The three dots within the text indicate that something has been left out, but the dots do not distinguish between sentences and nonsentences. At the end, however, we provide ellipsis dots and a terminal punctuation mark in the form of a question mark. As noted previously, the question mark can go before or after the ellipsis as long as you are consistent in how you handle the situation. The exclamation point works the same way.)

Original

He was also a shareholder in the Globe theater, where his plays were performed. Don't you think those are good accomplishments for a small-town boy?

With Ellipsis

He was a shareholder in the Globe theater. . . .

(We chopped off the end of the first sentence and ended our quote at that point. The resulting text is grammatically complete, so we end it with four dots (not three) to show that the quote is still a sentence, even though we removed something at the end.)

CAPITALIZATION AFTER ELLIPSIS***General Principle***

The first word after an ellipsis, if it is not already the beginning of a sentence, may be left in lower case, introduced with a bracketed capital, or simply capitalized. Conservative authorities require the use of a bracketed capital, in all scholarly works, to show that the word did not originally begin a sentence. However, this practice is purely pedantic. The following examples illustrate capitalization. The issue of three or four dots is unrelated to the capitalization. However, people who pedantically demand forms like <[H]e> are the same ones who will want four-dot ellipsis after grammatically complete text.

Scholarly

Shakespeare was born in 1564. . . . [H]e went to London, maybe took some odd jobs here and there, and soon became a prominent actor. . . .

Shakespeare was born in 1564 . . . [H]e went to London, maybe took some odd jobs here and there, and soon became a prominent actor. . . .

(The more pedantic would prefer four dots after <1564>.)

Acceptable

Shakespeare was born in 1564. . . . he went to London, maybe took some odd jobs here and there, and soon became a prominent actor. . . .

Shakespeare was born in 1564. . . . He went to London, maybe took some odd jobs here and there, and soon became a prominent actor. . . .

Shakespeare was born in 1564 . . . he went to London, maybe took some odd jobs here and there, and soon became a prominent actor. . . .

Shakespeare was born in 1564 . . . He went to London, maybe took some odd jobs here and there, and soon became a prominent actor. . . .

NOTE: The reason for the ellipsis at the end of the quotes is that the original did not stop after «prominent actor» but continued with «and playwright». The text needs four dots at the end because the final ellipsis provides the end of a complete sentence, which would ordinarily need a period.

SPACING OF DOTS

Spacing Is Important

It is common for writers to be sloppy in their handling of ellipsis dots. They often place the dots together with no spaces between them, but such practice is generally unacceptable. As a rule, a space should always be placed between any two dots, as well as between a dot and any other adjacent mark of punctuation. However, screenplays provide an exception to the rule when the font is a monospaced one such as Courier.

ELLIPSIS IN SCREENPLAYS

Playwrights and screenwriters use ellipsis in dialogue lines to indicate pauses, uncertainty, or faltering speech. I should point out that writers greatly overuse ellipsis for these purposes. Far too often they try to provide nuances of speech when that kind of authorial directing is unnecessary.

The standard font for screenplays is Courier, which is a monospaced font. Ellipsis dots look horrible in Courier when they have spaces between them. More importantly, if your screenwriting software does not support «nonbreaking» spaces, dots may become separated at the end of a line when the line wraps. For these reasons it is better to omit the spaces between the dots.

The current practice of handling ellipsis in screenplays follows the whim of each writer. Nonetheless, it is possible to offer some guidelines based on a rational application of the general principles already presented.

Standard Method

The screenwriter can follow the Standard Method as described previously.

Correct form

HANK

You look strange today.... What's
wrong?... Please, just ... tell me.

Grammatically complete text uses four-dot ellipsis (or the equivalent question mark plus three dots). Joining two fragments («Please, just» plus «tell me») uses a three-dot ellipsis with a space on each side of the group.

Three-Dot Method

Many writers cannot distinguish easily between text that is grammatically complete and text that is fragmentary. Fortunately, three-dot ellipsis, which is an acceptable method, keeps everything simple. As long as the dot group is preceded and followed by a space, three dots can connect a sentence to a sentence, a sentence to a fragment, or a fragment to a fragment. Although screenwriters commonly use the three dots, they almost always do so incorrectly. The most common error is to type three dots with no space before the group, but with a space after it, as in the following example.

Poor form

JIM
Tell me... Is this what you call friendly,
or are you, you know... just kidding?

Good form

JIM
Tell me ... Is this what you call friendly,
or are you, you know ... just kidding?

Capitalization of <Is> after the ellipsis is optional. The following is also correct.

JIM
Tell me ... is this what you call friendly,
or are you, you know ... just kidding?

Good form

HANK
You look strange today ... What's
wrong?... Please, just ... tell me.

Poor form

HANK
You look strange today ... What's
wrong? ... Please, just ... tell me.

The problem is that the question mark and the three dots ought to be joined into a unit.

Poor form

HANK

You look strange today...What's
wrong?...Please, just...tell me.

Lines like those above are nightmares when a line needs to wrap. The wrap takes place, and a long string of characters wraps to the next line, because the characters have no space where the line could more efficiently break.

Dialogue That Trails Off

Sometimes a writer will use a series of dots at the very end of a speech to indicate that the words trail off or that a pause ensues. If the statement is grammatically complete, the writer may optionally use either four-dot or three-dot ellipsis. (Remember that something like <?...> counts as four-dots.) But in the event that the statement is not grammatically complete, the three-dot ellipsis is the better form. Some examples follow. Examples always provide the best explanation.

Correct forms

I guess this is my friend....

It is grammatically complete, so four-dot ellipsis is correct.

I guess this is my friend ...

It is grammatically complete, but when the point of ellipsis is to show speech that is trailing off, the three-dot form is acceptable. Notice that a space comes in front of the dot group. That space should be a nonbreaking space.

With all his money, still ...

Not a grammatically complete statement. You need the three-dot form.

Is this my friend?...

Grammatically complete (a sentence). The final three dots after the question mark just indicate a pause or a trailing off. This form, with the question mark before the dots, is preferable to <...?>, because the trailing off takes place after the completion of the question.

You've got to be kidding!...

Grammatically complete (a sentence). The final three dots after the exclamation point just indicate a pause or trailing off. This is the only acceptable form when you have an exclamation point or a question mark

with an ellipsis that shows trailing off in the dialogue.

I guess this is my friend....

I guess this is my friend ...

This is a complete sentence, but since the only purpose of the ellipsis is to show a pause or trailing off, use of four dots or three dots is acceptable.

FINAL COMMENTS

The Three-Dot Group

If you cannot figure out what to do, use a three-dot group. Put a space before and after the group. Of course, if the dot group is at the end of a paragraph, you do not need a space after the group and you should not use one.

You do not ordinarily need a nonbreaking space before or after a dot group. However, if you are using three-dot ellipsis to show speech that trails off at the end of a paragraph, you do not want the group of dots to wrap to a new line and be the only thing on the line as in:

HANK
You look strange today ... What's
wrong?... Just please ... tell me
...

That final ellipsis group looks really dumb sitting there by itself. The best way to correct this is to use a nonbreaking space between the word <me> and the dot group <...>. Then the line will wrap in a more acceptable manner:

HANK
You look strange today ... What's
wrong?... Just please ...
tell me ...

Screenplay programs and word processors generally have a way to let you adjust the right margin of the dialogue column, so that you can allow a few more spaces to the lines in a particular paragraph. Consequently, you could also correct the example above by fudging the right margin just a tad:

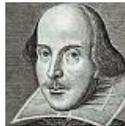
HANK
You look strange today ... What's
wrong?... Just please ... tell me ...

But I would still use a nonbreaking space before that last <...>, even if I fudged the

margin, because somebody else may later reformat the script with different margin settings, and the dots might yet again end up on a line by themselves.

For Plays and Screenplays

If you are writing with a monospaced font, such as Courier, in a script for stage or screen, do not put a space between any of the dots. (You still need spaces before or after the dot group, as appropriate.) With proportionally spaced fonts, such as Georgia or Times New Roman, use nonbreaking spaces between dots. If your manuscript is for a novel or an essay, and you are using Courier, you can put spaces between the dots, because those manuscripts do not have narrow text columns like the dialogue column in a screenplay.



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If you discover any errors, including simple typos, please let me know. It takes several days, at least, to write one of these articles. I check and polish things repeatedly as I go along, but honestly it is difficult to go back and read everything again right away after I finish an article. Yes, we do get sick of our own work and need some time away from it.