

THE ELLIPSIS (. . .)

By R. Ann Siracusa

One of the most frequent errors I've noticed when judging Golden Heart entries and local contests over the years, is the incorrect use of dashes and of the ellipsis.

Your first question may be, "What is an ellipsis?"

"Well . . ." She hesitated and palmed the back of her neck, ". . . I think it's a punctuation mark. Three dots . . . with a space between each of them.. I guess those spaces are really important."

Go Girl!

"So, who cares?" you ask.

She shrugged. "No one, I guess . . . except editors who are looking for reasons to turn down your manuscript."

Unless you majored in English Grammar in college, it's possible you've never heard of an ellipsis. I hadn't until I started writing. I'd seen it used in enough books to have an intuitive grasp of how the punctuation should be used, but I didn't know its name or the rules of usage. So I sprinkled little black dots liberally in my manuscripts. The fact that I'd used the ellipsis incorrectly was pointed out to me by my agent, about ten or twelve years ago, before he sent out my novel. I had to correct all the mistakes in my six-hundred-page manuscript, and *it was a lot of work*. . . .

Since then I've made an attempt to master the usage of the ellipsis because I like the effects it can help me achieve in my writing.

USAGE

The word ellipsis comes from the Greek "to leave out" or "fall short." It has three distinct functions:

- Indicating omissions in quoted material.
- Indicating hesitation or trailing off in spoken words.
- Imparting extra significance to a sentence.

OMISSIONS

This usage deals with quotations but has some relevance to creative writing that uses quotes. You may abridge a quotation, but cannot pass it off as the original. If you take anything out, you must put in an ellipsis in its place to let the reader know something is missing.

USAGE IN DIALOGUE

In fiction writing the most common usage of an ellipsis is within dialogue. There are several ways to use this punctuation in dialogue to indicate the following:

1. An Omission In A One-sided Conversation, such as a phone conversation, where the writer is showing only what one person is saying, such as the following.

"Yes. . . . Well, I can't talk now. . . . Can you call me later?"

When used in this manner, the ellipsis is three dots followed by a period. The first dot follows immediately after the word *with no space*. There must be a space between each of the dots. There are two spaces (or one, if you only use one space at the end of your sentences) between the period and the first word of the next sentence. Since the last dot is actually a period, you would begin the next sentence with a capital letter.

2. A Hesitation In Speech. This can serve a number of purposes in fiction writing. The use of ellipses can make speech appear nervous or indecisive, such as the following.

“Let’s go now. Is that okay with you?”

“Well . . . gosh, I don’t know . . . I think they’re not expecting us before two o’clock.”

It can also be used to make the dialogue seem laid back or musing.

“It’s memory, my dear. Memory, the mother of the Muses . . . at least that’s what thingummy said.”

“Who?”

“You know, what’s his name, Greek poet chap. The one who wrote the Theogony . . . what was he called? Begins with an ‘H’.”

--Stephen Fry, *The Liar*

In addition, it can add a mysterious or dreamy quality to the dialogue.

“Tonight it will be a year . . . My star, then, can be found right above the place where I came to the Earth, a year ago . . .” he said.

--Antoine De Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*.

In the case of a hesitation, there is a space required *before* the first dot, a space between each dot, and a space after the last dot (before the first letter of the next word). For those of you who use word processing programs (which, I assure you, never studied English Grammar), you may have a program that automatically takes out the spaces. Try using two spaces between dots to keep the program from closing them up. If that doesn’t work, rethink your punctuation. There are other options. Don’t put out a manuscript you know contains incorrect punctuation.

3. A Trailing Off In Speech or An Interruption.

“Where were you?”

I started to explain. “I went to the bar. Listen, while I was there I overheard something you need . . .”

“What were you doing in the bar?” he interrupted.

When using an ellipsis to show the speaker’s sentence trailing off or to indicate an interruption, use a space after the last word, three dots (with a space between the second and third dot), and put the end-quote mark *immediately* after the third dot.

4. Several Speakers Completing A Single Sentence. In this case, each speaker pauses to let the next one continue. While it would be correct to use em dashes for this purpose, that punctuation gives the impression of forcible interruptions rather than voluntary pauses. Heavy stuff, right?

Uneasy, thinking of Cournoyer, the team's captain, at home, his distinguished career probably over, Lapointe says, "Hey, let's win this one for Yvan," and instantly the room picks up. "Poor little guy," he continues, "his back all busted up, probably just lyin' at home . . ." and as he pauses as if to let his words sink in, Shutte and Houle jump in before anyone else can.

" . . . havin' a little wine . . ."

" . . . a little Caesar salad . . ."

" . . . poor little bastard," Lapointe muses sadly, and we all laugh.

*--Ken Dryden, *The Game**

As each person picks up on the sentence, it begins with a quotation mark followed immediately by the first dot of the ellipsis. There is a space between each dot and a space after the third one, before the first word. The end of the sentence, showing a pause, is the same as a trailing off of speech or an interruption. This same format is used in a single sentence when the speaker pauses and the writer shows an action by that speaker.

"Maybe . . ." Frowning, he stroked his chin as he thought about what she'd said. ". . . I guess we'll find out."

USAGE IN NON-DIALOGUE WRITING

The use of ellipses in non-dialogue writing imparts extra significance to words. An author can achieve several different effects by using this punctuation in non-dialogue writing.

1. Underscores A Point That Need Not Be Stated Explicitly.

"I want the King of Euralia's blood." He looked around the court. "To anyone who will bring me the head of the King, I will give the hand of my daughter in marriage."

There was a profound silence. . . .

"Which daughter?" said a cautious voice at last.

"The eldest," said the King.

There was another profound silence. . . .

*--A.A.Milne, *Once on a Time**

Okay! In giving emphasis to words or making a point, the ellipsis appears to be four dots. However, the grammar books tell us this is actually an ellipsis (which is three dots) and a period. HOWEVER, please note that the first dot starts *immediately* after the last word with no space. As always, there is a space between each dot. This usage is not, generally, followed by another sentence in the same paragraph because that tends to diminish the impact, which is the reason it is used at all. I have yet to find the written rules on whether the period can be replaced with a

question mark or exclamation point, although I have seen those used in books.

2. Imparts A Haunting, Surreal, Or Dreamy Aspect.

I have escaped to this island with a few books and the child--Melissa's child. I do not know why I use the word 'escape'. The villagers say jokingly that only a sick man would choose such a remote place to rebuild. Well, then, I have come here to heal myself, if you like to put it that way. . . .

--Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*

3. Creates A Sense Of Suspense.

Good Gracious, was he seeing things? But who--how--he saw the upraised arm too late. . . .

Stars exploded in a kind of Guy Fawkes' display within in head. . . .

--Agatha Christie, *At Bertram's Hotel*

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you are going to use the ellipsis, learn to use it correctly. The ellipsis is used for emphasis--to draw the attention of the reader. Now that you have the editor's attention, he or she will notice if the punctuation is used incorrectly. Otherwise, get your point across in a different way.

Reference: Ann Stilman, *Grammatically Correct* (Writer's Digest Books, 1997)

f:ellipses / mydocs/ writing general

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