

Three Dots in a Row . . . Using the Ellipsis



The ellipsis has two main functions in writing:

- 1) In fiction, speech which peters out, or a slight pause during a speech.
- 2) In quotes, a way of indicating material that has been deliberately left out.

Ellipsis in speech

This can occur at the beginning, the middle or the end of a sentence:

John hesitated. ' . . .The truth is, I'm going to leave you.'
'The truth is . . . I'm going to leave you.'
'The truth is, I'm going to . . . ' John hesitated.

A full stop is not required when the ellipsis indicates an incomplete sentence, as in the third example above. More on that, however, when we look at quotes later.

Don't use three dots if you want to show an interruption. For that, you need an em rule:

'The truth is, I'm going to—'
'Don't say it!'

Ellipsis in quotes

This indicates that something has been deliberately left out of the quoted material:

It is now widely known that during the Cold War most espionage went undetected.

It is now widely known that . . . most espionage went undetected.

What happens if you cut out a chunk ending with a full stop?

You add another dot.

(Believe it!)

There are no prizes for guessing how many crimes there were. Nobody knows the exact number of misdemeanours.

There are no prizes for guessing Nobody knows the exact number of misdemeanours.

The first three dots are the ellipsis, indicating the excision of *how many crimes there were*, followed by the full stop after *were*.

When you cut material out of quotes like this, you have to be quite careful not to alter the meaning of the original in any way. I once saw a funny example of this about a piece of music, on the lines of this bowdlerised version below:

Critical response to Johnson's Seventeen Rhapsodies for Snare Drum has been curiously unanimous:

' . . . interesting . . . '

What on earth could have been left out here?

Spaces

The ellipsis can have a space between each dot, or not. Both forms are acceptable; just don't mix and match between the two.

...

. . .

It's usual to put a space before and after as well, except when one of the dots sits right next to a quotation mark:

' . . . interesting . . .'

Music ... that grates on the ear.

So far so good. But how do you type an ellipsis? It's just three full stops in a row, right?

Yes and no. This is what could happen if you were inputting them into an e-book:

Approaching the end of a line, this could happen ..

.

Whoops! How do we solve that?

The simplest solution is to press Ctrl + Alt + the full stop key, and this will create an indivisible ellipsis.

In Word, this tends to present us with the tighter version, so if you want the spaced one, you need to add two non-breaking spaces inside the ellipsis. Type:

.

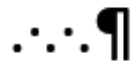
Ctrl + Shift + spacebar

.

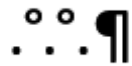
Ctrl + Shift + spacebar

.

If you don't believe it, press the ¶ symbol (under Paragraph in the Home tab) and you will see when there are spaces:



And when there are none:



I hope this has given you a clearer idea of how to use this small, but slightly prickly item.

Ivor McGregor January 2022