

Ellipses

An ellipsis is a set of three periods (. . .) indicating an omission. Each period should have a single space on either side, except when adjacent to a quotation mark, in which case there should be no space.

Informal Writing

In informal writing, an ellipsis can be used to represent a trailing off of thought.

If only she had . . . Oh, it doesn't matter now.

An ellipsis can also indicate hesitation, though in this case the punctuation is more accurately described as suspension points.

I wasn't really . . . well, what I mean . . . see, the thing is . . . I didn't mean it.

Like the exclamation point, the ellipsis is at risk of overuse.

In Quoted Material

Ellipses are most useful when working with quoted material. There are various methods of deploying ellipses; the one described here is acceptable for most professional and scholarly work.

The following examples are based on a paragraph from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

Ellipses at the Beginning of a Quotation

It is rarely necessary to use ellipsis points at the beginning of a quotation, even if the quotation begins mid-sentence. It is also usually acceptable to change the capitalization of the first word of the quotation to match the surrounding material. (When a change in capitalization must be acknowledged, you should use brackets.)

"If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams," writes Thoreau, "he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours." Moreover, Thoreau claims that "in proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex."

Quotations Placed in the Middle of a Sentence

When a quotation is included within a larger sentence, do not use ellipsis points at the beginning or end of the quoted material, even if the beginning or end of the original sentence has been omitted.

Correct: When Thoreau argues that by simplifying one's life, "the laws of the universe will appear less complex," he introduces an idea explored at length in his subsequent writings.

Incorrect: When Thoreau argues that by simplifying one's life, ". . . the laws of the universe will appear less complex, . . ." he introduces an idea explored at length in his subsequent writings.

Quotations Placed at the End of a Sentence

When a quotation is placed at the end of a sentence, but the quoted material is only part of a larger sentence, authorities differ on the use of ellipsis points. The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* requires ellipsis points. MLA style places the sentence-terminating period immediately after the last word of the quotation, even though a period does not occur there in the original material. The three ellipsis points are then placed after this sentence-terminating period.

Thoreau argues that by simplifying one's life, "the laws of the universe will appear less complex"

Could anyone other than Thoreau have written, "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost . . .?"

When using MLA-style parenthetical references, the sentence-terminating period is placed outside the parenthetical reference.

Thoreau argues that by simplifying one's life, "the laws of the universe will appear less complex . . ." (152).

Ellipses for Omitted Material within a Single Quoted Sentence

Use ellipsis points to show omission within the quotation. Omit any punctuation on either side of the ellipsis, unless the punctuation is necessary to make the shortened quotation grammatically correct.

"I learned this . . . : that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, . . . he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

In the example above, the colon in the original is needed to introduce the thing that Thoreau learned. The comma after "dreams" is necessary to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause.

Ellipses for Omitted Material Spanning Two or More Sentences

When a quotation is presented as a single sentence made up of material from two or more original sentences, ellipses should be used for all omitted segments.

Thoreau believes that "if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, . . . he will live with the license of a higher order of beings."

When quoted material is presented as multiple sentences, four dots should be used for omissions between two or more original sentences; three dots should be used for omissions within a single original sentence.

In the example below, MLA style requires an ellipsis at the end of the quotation, indicating that a portion of the original sentence has been omitted.

Thoreau notes: "I learned . . . that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, . . . he will meet with . . . success. . . . He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary. . . . In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex. . ." (152).