

Ellipsis as a figure of speech

Ellipsis is a figure of speech in which one or more words are deliberately omitted from a sentence, while the intended meaning remains clear from the context. The omitted words can usually be supplied mentally by the reader or listener. The term comes from the Greek word *elleipsis*, meaning “omission” or “falling short.” It is used both as a grammatical device and as a literary and rhetorical device. In literature, writers use ellipsis not merely to shorten a sentence but also to create emphasis, rhythm, suspense, emotional intensity, ambiguity and a sense of incompleteness.

For example: “Some went to the left, others to the right.”

Here, the verb “went” is omitted before “to the right.” The complete form would be: “Some went to the left, others went to the right.” The omission avoids unnecessary repetition and makes the sentence more concise.

Functions of Ellipsis:

1. To create brevity and conciseness: One of the most important functions of ellipsis is to make language shorter and more economical. Words that can easily be understood from the context are omitted. Example: “She ordered tea; he, coffee.”

The verb “ordered” is omitted before “coffee.” The complete sentence would be “She ordered tea; he ordered coffee.”

2. To avoid repetition: Ellipsis allows a writer to avoid repeating the same words or grammatical structures. Example: “John likes poetry; Mary, novels.”

The word “likes” is omitted after “Mary.” The sentence therefore becomes more elegant and less repetitive. This technique is particularly common in poetry, where economy of language is important.

3. To create emphasis: Sometimes what is left unsaid can be as significant as what is said. By removing an expected word or phrase, the writer can make the remaining words more prominent. For example: “You promised—and now?”

The unfinished expression places emphasis on the speaker's disappointment and expectation.

4. To express strong emotion: Ellipsis can represent hesitation, grief, surprise, fear, excitement, anger or emotional disturbance. When people experience strong emotions, they may be unable or unwilling to complete their sentences. For example: “If only I had...”

The unfinished sentence suggests that the speaker is overwhelmed by regret. The reader is left to imagine what follows.

5. To create suspense and anticipation: Ellipsis can deliberately withhold information and therefore make the reader curious. For example: “When he finally opened the letter, he discovered...”

The omission creates anticipation because the reader wants to know what he discovered.

6. To create ambiguity: Ellipsis may leave a statement open to more than one interpretation. The reader must supply the missing information. This makes literary language more suggestive and indirect and encourages active participation from the reader.

7. To reproduce natural speech: In ordinary conversation, people frequently omit words because the meaning is already understood. For example: "Coming with us?" The grammatically complete form would be: "Are you coming with us?" The shorter form sounds more natural and conversational. Writers often use such ellipses in dialogue to make characters' speech realistic.

8. To create rhythm: Poets often omit words to maintain rhythm, metre and intensity. Since poetry frequently attempts to communicate complex ideas in a limited number of words, ellipsis becomes a useful technique. The omission can make a poetic line sharper and more memorable.

Ellipsis has been widely employed by English writers and poets. Its uses vary according to the genre and literary purpose. Shakespeare frequently uses incomplete or compressed expressions in his dramatic dialogue. His characters often speak in fragments when experiencing intense emotions. A famous example occurs in Hamlet: "To be, or not to be: that is the question." The expression is rhetorically compressed. The omitted alternatives and implications surrounding existence and non-existence are left for the audience to contemplate. Another example appears in Macbeth: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow..." The repeated word "tomorrow", combined with the suspension created by the ellipsis, conveys Macbeth's sense of the endless and monotonous movement of time. The repetition and omission work together to create a feeling of exhaustion and despair.

Ellipsis is also significant in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Her poems frequently contain dashes, fragmented expressions and omissions. These features produce ambiguity, pauses and multiple possible meanings. In "Because I could not stop for Death—", Dickinson writes: "Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—" The dashes interrupt the normal flow of the sentences and create pauses. Although Dickinson's dashes are not all examples of grammatical ellipsis, they frequently perform an elliptical function by leaving relationships and meanings unstated. Modernist poetry makes extensive use of fragmented and elliptical language. T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is a major example. For instance: "April is the cruellest month..." This elliptical technique reflects the fragmented experience of modern life, which is one of the central concerns of Modernist literature.

One of the most important effects of literary ellipsis is that it makes the reader an active participant. When a writer deliberately leaves something unsaid, the reader has to supply the missing information; interpret the silence; infer a character's feelings; connect fragmented ideas or consider possible meanings. Therefore, ellipsis can make a literary text more open-ended, suggestive and intellectually engaging.