

Test Your Grammar Skills

Understanding Ellipsis – Information Page

Ellipsis occurs when we leave out unnecessary words from a sentence. The omitted words are unnecessary for working out the meaning, because they do not affect the meaning, e.g.

*This is the book I like. NOT This is the book **that** I like.*

In this way, ellipsis ‘tidies up’ the sentence by making it more streamlined or ‘word-efficient’. In English, it is not necessary to repeat words and phrases in the same sentence, for example: “*The twins bought ice creams for ~~the twins~~ themselves.*” This creates **redundancy**. We can also use ellipsis when we know the listener or reader is aware of the meaning from the context, e.g.

Two friends walk into their work canteen and one goes towards the kettle.
He says to his colleague: “Tea?” instead of “*Would you like a cup of tea?*”

Native speakers use ellipsis all the time, and are quite proficient with it. They know what is missing and why it does not matter to the meaning. However, learners of English may realise that part of the sentence is missing, but struggle to guess the missing part. They find they don’t get the meaning of the sentence, because “something is missing” – which is the definition of ellipsis. However, sometimes we don’t use ellipsis when we want to sound more formal, e.g. “*It is the book that I like.*” is more formal than “*It’s the book I like.*”

There are many kinds of ellipsis, some of which are listed below. We can use one or more of them in the same sentence:

Textual ellipsis – the surrounding text makes the meaning clear:

Type of ellipsis:	Example with ellipsis:	The full sentence without ellipsis:
1. contractions	We’ll go for a meal.	We will go for a meal.
2. relative pronoun (or clause) missing	The bike I bought yesterday...	The bike that I bought yesterday...
3. verb phrase missing before gerund	While driving, I thought of you.	While I was driving, I thought of you.
4. verb phrase missing after verb + to	We can leave, if you want to.	We can leave, if you want to leave .
5. pronoun replaces a noun phrase	That bike was the one I borrowed.	That bike was the bike that I borrowed.
6. imperative form replaces modal	Go with us tomorrow.	You could go with us tomorrow.

Situational ellipsis – knowledge of the context makes the meaning clear:

Type of ellipsis:	Example with ellipsis:	The full sentence without ellipsis:
7. a word or two replace a sentence	Football?	Do you want to go and play football?
8. auxiliary verb(s) (or be) missing	You watching the match later?	Are you watching the match later?
9. short answer instead of full	“Did you take the call?” “Yes, I did.”	“Yes, I did take the call. ”

Structural ellipsis – general/cultural knowledge makes the meaning clear:

Type of ellipsis:	Example with ellipsis:	The full sentence without ellipsis:
10. news headline, title of book/film, etc., slogan – assumes reader’s prior knowledge	Tories deliver killer blow at election.	The Conservative Party (nicknamed the Tories = slang) wins decisively (delivers killer blow = slang) at the General Election.

Telegraphic ellipsis – note form, which is clear to the original writer:

Type of ellipsis:	Example with ellipsis:	The full text without ellipsis:
11. note form, e.g. diary entry, shopping list, note to self, etc.	Got up, had breakfast, went out, met Philip, walked to South Bank, then Tate M.	I got up and had breakfast, then I went out and met Philip. We walked to the South Bank, then we went to Tate Modern.

Note: in **punctuation**, an **ellipsis** is the symbol with three dots: ...
This also means that something is missing: *We went to the library ... five minutes later we had to leave!*
or that something continues: *Nobody guessed who broke the washing machine, but...*