

# The Last Word

## You don't say: some thoughts on ellipses

by Karen Virag

An ellipsis mark (plural “ellipses”) consists of three spaced periods that indicate the omission of a paragraph, phrase, or word. The word *ellipsis* comes to us with an honourable Mediterranean heritage: via French, Latin, and ultimately from the Greek word *elleipsis*, meaning “to come short” or “to omit.”

The ellipsis mark involves a symbolically significant number—the 3—which has long been considered sacred in many cultures and which was at one time worshipped by more people than Lady Gaga. Ancient fans of the 3 include the Assyrians, Phoenicians, and Druids. Furthermore, the 3 has many religious overtones, such as the Christian and Hindu holy trinities. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, there were the three Graces, three Fates, and three Furies; the three-headed dog Cerberus; and the trident of Neptune. Today, you've got your three primary colours, your three little bears, your three little pigs, and, of course, your three wise men (and ladies, no jokes about never having met one. We're here to grumble about ellipses, not men). The Global Positioning System, that handy little tool that allows women to stop nagging their clueless husbands to ask for directions, works by triangulation. (I just contradicted myself. Oh well.) And finally, the 3 is a perfect number: it is the first number that has a beginning, a middle, and, like so many love affairs, an end. Sadly,

though, the 3's grand and colourful history, and its amazing mythical and folkloric resonances, are lost on today's laity, most of whom use the ellipsis as a kind of über-period. And though it is true that the ellipsis mark can be used to indicate a faltering speech (as in “But ... but ...” cried the proctologist) or a thought trailing off (the fancy schmancy name for this is *aposiopesis*), this device is so overused that the number of trailing thoughts in Canada could cross the country. Thrice.

Briefly, *The Chicago Manual of Style* [15<sup>th</sup> ed.] identifies three methods of using ellipses: (1) the three-dot method, (2) the four-dot method, in which the first dot is a period, and (3) the rigorous method (and they think editors are wimps), all of which are described in detail in section 11.51.

Ellipses, however many dots they have, can easily be misused to introduce ambiguity, which could lead to some interesting situations. Consider the following example:

Over the course of the evening, the editor drank ... alcohol.

The missing text could stand for “no” or “the equivalent of a bathtub full of.” Use ellipses in this way at your peril.

In addition to the ellipsis mark, we have what

*The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* calls axiomatically legitimate types of elliptical constructions. For example, “Looks like rain,” “Serves you right,” and “Want some?” are elliptical sentences in which a pronoun has been omitted, but the reader can easily fill in the gap. Other examples are the usual omission in English grammar of certain elements (for example, the definite article “the” and the “to” of the infinitive) in expressions such as the following:

He ate the peach, melon, and apple, but left the strawberry. (Note the omission of “the” before “melon” and “apple.”)

and

We wanted to add a comma and erase the exclamation mark. (Note the omission of “to” before the infinitive verb “erase.”)

*New Fowler's* notes that in an elliptical sentence such as “The editor was hanged but the proofreader merely flogged,” the reader or listener is well able to supply the missing verb “was” after “proofreader” with no discomfort (and keeping our readers comfortable

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