



... *Really*, ... *Bash*:

A Brief Tract on the Use of Ellipses within Quotations

The ellipsis is an important tool signaling that wording that has been left out from a quotation. The three dots, . . . , usually represent material that you consider unimportant to the logic of your essay. When choosing passages to excerpt, be careful not to change the core meaning.

As with much punctuation, there is no definitive guide to proper usage. Some will view this tract as hopelessly permissive; others will consider it ridiculously specific.

Consider the following intriguing passage; then consider the uses of ellipses that follow. (*Ellipses* is the plural form of *ellipsis*.)

Way back in the mists of Stockton's protohistory, sometime after the Mayflower but before invention of the Gussman circle, conscientious Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing a party. This inaugural party, whose date is lost to the murky haze of forgetfulness, was called *the party*. In subsequent semesters it was sensibly redesignated as the *end-of-term party*. But the new appellation, like the essay title *Class Assignment # 1*, was lame, so a secretive committee was empowered to develop a more effective designation. From those deliberations came *The Really, Really Big LITT/LANG Holiday Workshop Bash*. The moniker made great sense back in the early 1990s when an edict from on high proclaimed that no parties would be thrown for students. No problem the committee reasoned; this is a workshop (at which Ken Tompkins sometimes read stories). It was a Bash! This fine and swanky title has since been shortened to *The Really, Really Big LITT Bash*. The date of this year's Bash is April 20th, at 4:30, in the TRLC.

Remember the ellipsis is a unit; when you delete material, replace it with three dots. Modern usage adds a space between each dot, thus DOT SPACE DOT SPACE DOT. If the ellipsis breaks at the end of the line use a non-breaking space (Ctrl+Shift+Space on Windows; Option+Shift+Space on a Mac).

Below are examples with increasing levels of complexity.

1. Modern style sheets (Hacker, Harbrace, Prentice Hall, etc.) do not require ellipses at the opening or closing of excerpted quotations, as long as the selection ends at a period or other terminal punctuation.

“Way back . . . Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing a party.”

In the example above, a large portion of the first sentence has been dropped; the deletion is denoted by the ellipsis. It is understood that this passage is part of a larger unit, yet no ellipsis is needed at the start or conclusion.

“Way back . . . Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing . . . *The Really, Really Big LITT Bash.*”

The example above is a bit more ambitious. A portion of the first sentence has been deleted, designated by an ellipsis, but a larger portion including parts of four sentences has also been dropped, denoted by the second ellipsis.

2. If you begin a sentence with an excerpt from the middle of a quotation, there is no need for an initial ellipsis. Fifty years ago you would have been asked to use a bracket to show that you had introduced capitalization – “[I]t was sensibly . . .” – but in modern usage there is no need to bracket this change.

“It was sensibly redesignated the *end-of-term party.*”

3. Consider the following example which excerpts a portion that does not end with a period or other terminal punctuation.

The moniker made great sense back in the early 1990s

Here we have an ellipsis following “1990s” but we also have a final period, showing that the deletion was not the conclusion of the quoted sentence.

4. The trick to using ellipses in quotations is to attend to the punctuation in the original. If you are deleting words that do not begin or end with punctuation, then simply denote with an ellipsis. But, and this is a big point, if your excerpt begins or ends with punctuation, show it.

“This inaugural party, . . . is lost to the murky haze”

“No problem . . . ; this is a workshop”

4. Skillful use of ellipses and original punctuation reveals a good deal about the excerpted material.

“In subsequent semesters it was sensibly redesignated”

“From those deliberations came *The Really, Really Big LITT/LANG Holiday Workshop Bash*. . . . This fine and swanky title has since been shortened to *The Really, Really Big LITT Bash*.”

The first example in no. 4 shows that the missing portion came before the end of the sentence, signalled by the final period. In the second example, the first sentence is complete and the ellipsis stands in for three intervening sentences. Note the careful spacing of the periods: in the second example the ellipsis begins *after* the first sentence is completed with a period. There are no four dot ellipses, only ellipses working in tandem with initial or terminal periods.

5. Consider the examples below which show the logical extension of this practice.

“Way back in the mists of Stockton’s protohistory, . . . , conscientious Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing a party.”

“The committee reasoned; . . . It was a Bash!”

“The date of this year’s Bash is April 20th, . . . , in the TRLC.”

“The new appellation, like the essay title . . . , was lame,”

This is very detailed and pretty aggressive usage. It is correct. And sometimes this level of punctuation is necessary to make the meaning of a quotation perfectly clear. But many authorities are willing to take a more moderate line that does not include localized punctuation. Consider the same examples in simplified form (check with your professor to see which style is advisable).

“The committee reasoned . . . It was a Bash!”

“The date of this year’s Bash is April 20th . . . in the TRLC.”

“The new appellation, like the essay title . . . was lame . . .”

7. Now let’s consider parenthetical citation. You do, after all, need to cite your sources. Let’s say that the quotation above appeared on page 5 of *A History of the Bash* (2012) written by T. F. Committee.

“Way back . . . Literature & Language faculty first met the challenge of student engagement by throwing a party” (Committee 5).

“This inaugural party . . . is lost to the murky haze . . .” (Committee 5).

“No problem the committee reasoned . . .” (Committee 5).

Note in the examples above that, following American typographic convention, the period comes outside of the citation. This is true unless the quotation is extracted and set apart from the main body of the essay.

8. Finally, consider the following passage and the excerpts taken from it.

The Bash is a program event of very long standing, and is it not a wonderful institution?

“The Bash . . . is it not a wonderful institution?” (Committee 6).

We answer in the affirmative and hope you will join us for chicken pesto, Austrian peasant sandwiches, pig cookies, and whatever else is brought to the communal table.



Puss in Boots explaining ellipses, by Gustave Doré

Semi-Random Glossary

Excerpt. n. A short piece of a longer text; v. to remove such a piece from a text.

Prose. Written or spoken language in its usual form, not verse.

Verse. Written or spoken language with a metrical structure.