

Using Ellipsis in MLA Style

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Summary: Provides advice for handling omitted material in quotations in MLA documentation style.

Learning Objectives: To know when to use ellipsis in MLA. To be able to format omitted material correctly.

Sometimes it is necessary to omit context from quoted material. An ellipsis (. . .) is used to indicate something was omitted. MLA requires ellipsis before or after the words used when you are quoting more than just a word or a phrase; however, writers only need to use ellipsis if it's unclear that the quotation does not completely reproduce the original passage.

For example, a writer would not need to use ellipsis in the following sentence: Lincoln spoke of “government of the people, by the people, for the people” in the *Gettysburg Address*. In this case, it's clear that the writer is not quoting the entire speech or even an entire sentence.



Importantly, MLA advises writers to ensure that omission does not change the meaning of the quoted material (the author's intent) or create grammatical errors.

Ellipsis in MLA Within a Sentence

To form an ellipsis in MLA within a sentence, use three periods with a space before each period and a space after the last period. Notice that the punctuation before and after an omission is included in MLA (the introductory phrase in the example below is maintained in the version where parts are omitted).

Original: Dampened by years of self-distrust, displaced by years of corporate codependency in which we have channeled our creative energies into managing others' perceptions of us, those energies awoken with startling power and poignancy.

Parts Omitted: “Dampened by years of self-distrust, . . . those energies awoken with startling power and poignancy” (Bryan, Cameron, and Allen 188).

Ellipsis at the End of a Sentence

To form an ellipsis in MLA when the omitted material appears at the end of your sentence, type the ellipsis with three periods with space before each period and include the closing quotation marks immediately after the third period. Note that the period to end your sentence comes after the parenthetical citation.



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Original: It also requires you to listen to emotions, not just to facts, and to understand the players – speaker and audience – intended and otherwise.

Parts Omitted: Bryan, Cameron, and Allen emphasize that listening “. . . requires you to listen to emotions . . .” (147).

If your sentence ends in omitted material and a parenthetical citation isn't used, then four periods are included in the ellipsis, with no space before the first period or after the last one.

Ex. Winston Churchill in a speech that became known as *We Shall Fight on the Beaches* declared, “We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France . . . we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. . . .”

Ellipsis Within a Paragraph

When quoting paragraphs in MLA style, you may need to omit entire sentences. If the omission begins at the end of a sentence, simply include the ellipsis in addition to the closing punctuation of the previous sentence:

Original: On a side note, why do airports have to be so challenging to navigate? Terminals and gates and going up to go down. Sound-minded individuals become utterly lost. Anxious and jet-lagged individuals have no hope. I mean, you can hire people to navigate the process of buying a plane ticket, but why can't you hire someone to navigate the airport? Better yet, we should just have airport safaris.

Parts Omitted: “On a side note, why do airports have to be so challenging to navigate? . . . Sound-minded individuals become utterly lost. Anxious and jet-lagged individuals have no hope” (Jones 1) .

If the omission begins in the middle of a sentence, include the ellipsis and the punctuation of that sentence only if it is needed for the resulting quotation to make sense:

Original: On a side note, why do airports have to be so challenging to navigate? Terminals and gates and going up to go down. Sound-minded individuals become utterly lost. Anxious and jet-lagged individuals have no hope. I mean, you can hire people to navigate the process of buying a plane ticket, but why can't you hire someone to navigate the airport? Better yet, we should just have airport safaris.

Parts Omitted: “On a side note, . . . you can hire people to navigate the process of buying a plane ticket, but why can't you hire someone to navigate the airport?” (Jones 1)

[The comma from the first sentence is included since it's needed grammatically to maintain the introductory phrase *on a side note*.]

Original: The French teacher taught me the most--he gave an update on the situation in the North. Though peace has come, the war left its toll. He said that students aren't learning in school because they did not receive basic training from their parents--there was no time or thought for training while they were being killed or avoiding being abducted.



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Parts Omitted: “The French teacher taught me the most[:] . . . He said that students aren't learning in school because they did not receive basic training from their parents” (Jones 1).

[The colon is added in brackets to indicate an addition was made to the original in order to make the whole sentence grammatically correct. Without it, the sentence would be a run-on. The dash could also be retained.]

Ellipsis in Poetry

For poetry, MLA includes a line of ellipses, approximately the length of a complete line of the poem if an entire line is omitted from a poem.

Parts Omitted from Poem:

In his poem *Marginalia*, Collins paints a picture of those delightful side comments that so many writers use:

Sometimes the notes are ferocious,
skirmishes against the author
raging along the borders of every page
in tiny black script.

Sometimes the notes are ferocious,
.....
raging along the borders of every page
in tiny black script. (1, 3-4)

Ellipses in Work that Includes Ellipsis

If the original work includes ellipses, include your ellipses in brackets [. . .] to distinguish between yours and the author's.

Original: I had an experience I can't prove, I can't even explain it, but everything . . . tells me that it was real. I was part of something wonderful, something that changed me forever; a vision of the Universe that tells us undeniably how tiny, and insignificant, and how rare and precious we all are.

Parts Omitted: “I had an experience I can't prove, I can't even explain it, but everything . . . tells me that it was real. I was part of something wonderful, [. . .] a vision of the Universe that tells us undeniably how tiny, and insignificant, and how rare and precious we all are” (*Contact* 231).



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Practice Exercises

For each of the following, use an ellipsis to replace the underlined material.

1. You not only must understand your audience but also keep this audience in mind at all times as you draft your paper. Many times your audience will be dictated to you by your instructor or workplace situation; other times you will get to choose an audience. In either case, you'll have to understand and then adapt your writing to that audience

- From the second page of Summer Leibensperger's "Define the Purpose, Consider the Audience, and Develop the Thesis" copyrighted 2003.

2. Of key importance to the theoretical structure of the model is the tenet that individual styles must be assessed and that, if a learner is going to have the best opportunity to learn, instructional techniques must be used that are congruent with each student's style

-From page 205 in DeBello's "Comparison of Eleven Major Learning Styles Models" copyrighted 1990.

3. The thought police would get him just the same. He had committed--would have committed, even if he had never set pen to paper--the essential crime that contained all others in itself. Thoughtcrime, they called it.

-From page 19 in Orwell's book *1984*.

4. I wish I could explain this place to you . . . everywhere is green and in the near distance a great mountain juts out against the sky, beckoning.

- From page 3 Karalyn Jones' blog, copyrighted 2008

Answers

1. "You not only must understand your audience but also keep this audience in mind at all times as you draft your paper . . . and . . . adapt your writing to that audience" (Leibensperger 2).
2. DeBello considers that the model is founded party on the idea ". . . that individual styles must be assessed, and that, if a learner is going to have the best opportunity to learn, instructional techniques must be used that are congruent with each student's style" (205).
3. "The thought police would get him just the same. He had committed . . . the essential crime that contained all others in itself. Thoughtcrime, they called it." (Orwell 19)
4. "I wish I could explain this place to you . . . everywhere is green and [. . .] a great mountain juts out against the sky, beckoning" (Jones 3).



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