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# A New Use for Ellipsis Points...

Larry G. Childs

## Introduction

Within the last seventy years or so, the three dots commonly known as ellipsis points, or simply, ellipses, have taken on a new use. Although probably the most common usage of ellipses today, this new use is completely ignored by almost all English style books. This paper examines the new usage in order to document a nearly undocumented change to our living English language.

If you open any newspaper or magazine, or read any sort of advertising blurb, you are almost guaranteed to find ellipsis points used as a "device to catch and hold the reader's interest," to quote the *Style Manual* in the College Edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1982, 60). Instances of this type of usage are plentiful. Let me give some examples of what might be called the *interest usage* of ellipsis points.

- From a newspaper advertising insert for a furniture store (*The Daily Herald*, Provo, Utah, 12 March 1992), accompanied by pictures of several sofas:  
**Your Choice...  
Buy It Today  
And Take It  
Home Today!**
- From a department store advertising insert in *The Daily Herald* (8 March 1992):  
**Sony, Zenith...save on the brands you trust.**
- From an advertisement for World War II videos in *U.S. News & World Report* (22 February 1993, p. 35)  
**U.S. News Video presents...  
WARRIORS  
The Warriors of World War II ...  
Meet them on video for the first time!**
- From a newspaper advertisement for classified advertising (*The Daily Herald*, 20 March 1992, p. B6), accompanied by a drawing of a clown:  
**THE DAILY HERALD  
CLASSIFIEDS. . .  
A CIRCUS OF VALUES**
- Newspaper headline about child skiers (*The Daily Herald*, 21 February 1993, p. E1):  
**These kids race for cookies . . .**
- Every section of the *USA Today* newspaper has a "Today's Tip-off" feature containing headlines with ellipses. Here are some examples from the 8 December 1992 edition:  
**Northwest Airlines is . . . extending the travel period for winter fare discounts  
You can speak to your ATM . . . with a system from NCR and AT&T Smart Cards  
On tape . . . The National Association of Basketball Coaches is offering a video**
- Headline about a boxer in *USA Today* (8 December 1992, p. 3C):  
**In this corner of the hotel ... Holyfield**
- From a mail flier advertising a software program (January 1993):  
**Attention: CorelDRAW Users...  
SPECIAL  
DOUBLE-UP  
OFFER!  
\$149**
- Software message displayed on the screen by Novell's NetWare software:  
**Press a key when ready...**
- From a mail flier advertising the visit of National Public Radio personality, Scott Simon to Salt Lake City (April 1992). Note the double usage of the ellipsis points:  
**SIMON SAYS . . .  
...mark your calendar for Monday, April 6, 1992  
...join me for breakfast at the Doubletree Hotel  
...Call KUER FM90 to make your reservations**

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- Sign on the door to the work area of a tire store in Provo, Utah:  
**For YOUR protection  
PLEASE  
do not enter work area. . . .  
machines & equipment may  
be hazardous to your health. . . .  
Thank You**

- Two signs posted in the lawn of an apartment complex across the street from Brigham Young University, one a few feet behind the other. The first sign reads:

**Cold?  
Tired?  
Hungry?...**

The second sign reads:

**If you lived at  
Monticello Apartments  
you'd be home by now!**

In addition to the above adverting examples, the interest usage is frequently found in comic strips and political cartoons, and occasionally in prose, as well.

- Political cartoon (*The Daily Herald*, 24 February 1993, p. B6), showing President Bill Clinton talking. In the first panel he says:

**There's nothing like dealing with deficit  
reduction, health care reform, tax hikes  
and so on . . .**

The second panel shows him saying:

**to get a fella really interested in foreign  
policy.**

- From the illustrated children's book, *A Pocket for Corduroy* (Freeman 1978), about a teddy bear who ends up in the laundry: (Children's books tend to use ellipses to hold the reader's interest more often than adult prose.)

**Before he knew it, Corduroy was being  
tossed, together with all the sheets,  
shirts, shorts, and slacks...**

Continued on the next page:  
**inside the dryer!**

I call the interest usage new for two reasons. First, its rise can be traced over the last seventy years or so. Second, descriptions of this usage have not yet found their way into most books and manuals of English style. Let us look at these reasons in detail.

### History

I have traced the history of the interest usage by checking old issues of the local newspaper (*The Daily Herald*, Provo, Utah) and of magazines that were available in the local library, such as *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Ladies' Home Journal*. I did not conduct an exhaustive search of every back issue, but rather chose selected issues over a range

of years. The earliest examples I found of the interest use of ellipsis points are from the mid 1920's, as in this advertisement for RCA Radiola in *The Ladies' Home Journal* (March 1925, p. 101):

**Good music, a glowing fire... comfort! Jokes,  
speeches, songs, dancing... fun!**

I checked selected issues of *The Ladies' Home Journal* as far back as 1913 (the earliest available issue), and *The Daily Enquirer* (the precursor of *The Daily Herald*) as far back as 1891, but found no earlier examples than 1925. These early issues were full of advertising copy in much the same format as in later years, but the advertisements used dashes and other more traditional punctuation where later advertisements used ellipsis points. (Note that other magazines, such as *Time* and *The New Yorker* only went back as far as the mid 1920's, but contained numerous examples of ellipses in their earliest issues.) The interest usage of ellipsis points became popular very rapidly after that. The local newspaper, *The Daily Herald*, was the slowest to adopt the usage; the first examples were found there in 1934. However, by the early 1930's, this usage was extremely common in all national magazines. By the 1940's, ellipsis points were as common as they are today in every periodical I examined. Its use in comic strips began about the same time as its use in advertising.

### Treatment in Style Books

Another way to appreciate the newness of the interest usage is to contrast it with traditional uses of ellipsis points. I consider a usage to be traditional if it is typically documented in books and manuals of English style. A survey of some 20 different English style books (listed in the bibliography) that deal with ellipsis points yielded two traditional uses: to indicate omissions from quoted material, and to indicate hesitating or faltering speech.

Not surprisingly, all the style books describe how ellipsis points are used to indicate omissions from quoted material. The very name of the punctuation implies this usage: 'ellipsis' means literally *to leave out* or *to leave behind*. The interested reader is referred to *The Chicago Manual of Style* for one of the most complete treatments of this usage.

The second most commonly described usage is to indicate hesitating or faltering speech, as in this example from *The Chicago Manual of Style* (1982, sec. 5.12):

Felicia sat down suddenly, almost as though she had fallen into her chair, and said, "I don't understand. We were beginning ... I had thought ..."

Again, *The Chicago Manual of Style* (1982, sec. 5.12) gives the most complete description of this usage. It emphasizes that this use suggests "confusion or indecisiveness" in speech. While it is true that the ellipsis points in some of the examples I showed above may indicate a pause or a break in thought, as does the hesitation usage, the interest usage in no way suggests confusion or indecisive-

ness. The hesitation usage also typically occurs in dialog, and the interest usage does not.

Only one of the twenty style books that dealt with ellipses described the interest usage of ellipsis points explicitly. It is the short *Style Manual* in the College Edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1982, 60) that I quoted earlier. The full quotation reads:

Ellipses are sometimes used as a device to catch and hold the reader's interest, especially in advertising copy.

Based on all the actual instances of this usage that I have encountered, this definition hits the mark exactly. Most of the instances I found were indeed in advertising copy. Also, "catching and holding the reader's interest" summarizes the main purposes of this usage quite well. In examples such as "U.S. News Video presents ... WARRIORS", the ellipsis points catch our attention very much like a fanfare or an announcer's pregnant pause before announcing the main attraction. In other examples, such as the "Cold? Tired? Hungry?..." sign, the ellipsis points hold our interest and tell us that there is more to come. It is this latter reason that makes them so popular in comic strips, where they often tie a single thought together across the panels of a comic strip, as in "There's nothing like dealing with deficit reduction, health care reform, tax hikes and so on. . . [panel break] to get a fella really interested in foreign policy." It is also this latter reason that allows them to serve as a separator between topic and comment, as in *The Warriors of World War II* ... Meet them on video for the first time!" After the topic is announced, they tell us to hold on because the comment will follow.

Considering how common this usage is, it is surprising that more style manuals do not treat it. I did find one other style manual that made an indirect allusion to this usage, which I will discuss later, but the vast majority of the books completely ignored it.

Not even the advertising world seems to be aware how commonly ellipses are used in advertising. In addition to English style books, I also consulted nine books on copy writing, the art of writing advertisements. While some of them dealt with the effective use of punctuation marks in advertising copy, none of them dealt with the use of ellipsis points.

### Prescription versus Description

By now, it has probably struck the careful reader that in traditional writing, virtually every instance of the interest use of ellipses can be avoided. These ellipsis points serve the same function as existing punctuation, such as colons, commas, dashes, and periods, or in many cases they can simply be left out without changing the meaning of the statement. The only other allusion to this new use of ellipsis points in the style books that I consulted was a warning to avoid using ellipses as "all-purpose punc-

tuation marks, for example, to punctuate the items in a series." The warning came in a section entitled "Weak Use of Ellipses" in the *Random House Handbook* (Crews 1974, 348), and was followed by this sample sentence:

Yogurt improves your morale ... releases your inhibitions ... postpones death ...

This example does describe one use of ellipsis points in advertising. Compare this example with the following sentence from a newspaper advertising insert for a kitchen utensil called the "Speed Slicer" (*The Daily Herald*, 8 March 1992):

Now you can mince fresh herbs and spices...shred cabbage for cole slaw...chop ham salad and slice up a perfect health salad in just seconds.

Here ellipses are used to keep our attention across the items of a series. However, the *Random House Handbook* is not attempting a general description of ellipsis points in advertising. Rather, it is prescribing a careful usage that happens to preclude much of their advertising use.

This brings us to a key question. Is there a place for the interest usage of ellipsis points in good writing? On the one hand, the criticism is valid that this usage is weak. Using a variety of traditional punctuation, each with its own distinct meaning, certainly lends itself to more precise expression than using ellipsis points as "all-purpose punctuation marks." On the other hand, why should we want to proscribe a usage that is extremely common, used productively by educated people, and is understood intuitively by virtually everyone? To illustrate this dilemma, I have saved my favorite example for last. This is the text from the cover of an Associated Press style manual (Cappon 1982), which, by the way, does not discuss ellipsis points at all on the inside:

The  
Associated Press  
Guide to  
Good Writing  
How to write reports, news stories, feature  
articles, business presentations and  
more ... by the world's largest  
newsgathering organization.

### Conclusions

My own conclusion is that using ellipsis points to "catch and hold the reader's interest" is not a matter of good versus poor writing. In the proper contexts, this usage is very effective, and despite a slight lack of precision, is understood intuitively by virtually every reader of American English who encounters it. Besides, it is so tremendously productive that it would be futile to try to condemn it. The real issue here is formality versus informality. Formal writing requires the precision offered by using a variety of similar punctuation marks in

unique and well-defined ways. But when appealing to the masses, using ellipsis points to catch and hold our interest seems to be the natural thing to do, even in good writing.

I also argue that style books should stop ignoring this interest usage of ellipsis points. Some language purists may quibble with me about their appropriateness, but how they are treated is a secondary issue. The point is that it is absurd to completely ignore what is probably their most common usage today.

We are still left with one unanswered question. Why did this use arise intuitively and rather abruptly in the 1920's? Here I cannot yet offer a conclusion, but only hypotheses about its intuitiveness and its recent inception.

First, the interest usage is very close to the established hesitation usage. It is a natural extension for ellipsis points to indicate a deliberate pause, when they already traditionally represent indecisive, faltering pauses. Such a shift could indeed occur intuitively without the help of style books to define it.

Second, the shift may have occurred in the 1920's as part of the spirit of the times. The whole social order of America changed drastically during that decade as a tremendous ground swell against everything traditional swept the country. The years after the first World War brought women's suffrage, women's entry into the traditionally male work force, new mobility because of the automobile, the popularization of Freudian psychology, and a revolution in ideas about sex, religion, politics, and social reform. This spirit of change must have affected language, as well. The great iconoclast of the period, H. L. Mencken, wrote already at the beginning of the decade about the American predilection for newness in language:

The American is not, in truth, lacking in a capacity for discipline; he has it highly developed; he submits to leadership readily, and even to tyranny. But, by a curious twist, it is not the leadership that is old and decorous that fetches him, but the leadership that is new and extravagant. He will resist dictation out of the past, but he will follow a new messiah with almost Russian willingness, and into the wildest vagaries of economics, religion, morals and speech....

Thus the American, on his linguistic side, likes to make his language as he goes along, and not all the hard work of his grammar teachers can hold the business back. A novelty loses nothing by the fact that it is a novelty; it rather gains something, and particularly if it meets the national fancy for the terse, the vivid, and, above all, the bold and imaginative. (Mencken 1921, 30-31)

It seems quite likely that a new means of expression, such as the interest use of ellipsis points,

could have arisen and become very popular during that decade of change. Further research into linguistic change in America in the 1920's is needed to help strengthen this hypothesis.

By itself, the subject of ellipsis points to "catch and hold the reader's interest" is only worthy of a few lines in the typical style book's treatment on ellipses. But as an example of language change, it helps to document the fascinating history of our living language.

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