

175 either ... or

We use *either ... or* to talk about a choice between two possibilities (and sometimes more than two).

I don't speak either French or German.

You can either come with me now or walk home.

If you want ice-cream there's either raspberry, lemon or vanilla.

We often balance this structure, so that the same kind of words or expressions follow *either* and *or*.

You can have either tea or coffee. (nouns)

He's either in London or in New York. (prepositional expressions)

Either you'll leave this house or I'll call the police. (clauses)

However, unbalanced sentences with *either ... or* are common. Some people prefer to avoid them.

You can either have tea or coffee.

He's either in London or New York.

You'll either leave this house or I'll call the police.

For *either* as a determiner, see 174.

For pronunciation, see 174.5.

For *not ... either, neither* and *nor*, see 374.

176 elder and eldest

Elder and *eldest* can be used instead of *older* and *oldest* to talk about the order of birth of the members of a family. They are only used attributively (before nouns). Compare:

– *My elder/older brother has just got married.*

He's three years older than me. (NOT ... ~~elder than me.~~)

– *His eldest/oldest daughter is a medical student.*

She's the oldest student in her year.

Elder brother/sister are used when a person has only one brother/sister who is older; *eldest* is used when there are more. An *elder son/daughter* is the older of two; an *eldest son/daughter* is the oldest of two or more.

177 ellipsis (1): introduction

We often leave out words to avoid repetition, or in other cases when the meaning can be understood without them. This is called 'ellipsis'.

1 replies

In replies we usually avoid repeating information that has just been given.

What time are you coming? ~ About ten. (More natural than *I'm coming about ten.*)

Who said that? ~ John. (More natural than *John said that.*)

How many chairs do you need? ~ Three. (More natural than *I need three chairs.*)

She's out this evening? ~ Yes, working. (More natural than *Yes, she's working this evening.*)

2 structures with *and*, *but* and *or*

Repeated words are often dropped in co-ordinate structures (see 178).

a knife and fork (= *a knife and a fork*)

She was poor but honest. (= ... but she was honest.)

3 at the beginning of a sentence

In informal speech, unstressed words are often dropped at the beginning of a sentence, if the meaning is clear. For details, see 179.

Seen Lucy? (= Have you seen Lucy?)

Doesn't know what she's talking about. (= She doesn't ...)

4 at the end of a noun phrase

It is sometimes possible to drop nouns after adjectives, noun modifiers and/or determiners. For details, see 180.

Do you want large eggs? ~ No, I'll have small. (= ... small eggs.)

My car isn't working. I'll have to use Mary's. (= ... Mary's car.)

We're going to hear the London Philharmonic tonight. (= ... the London Philharmonic Orchestra.)

Which shoes are you going to wear? ~ These. (= These shoes.)

5 at the end of a verb phrase

Auxiliary verbs are often used alone instead of full verbs. For details, see 181.

I haven't paid. ~ I haven't either. (= ... I haven't paid either.)

She said she'd phone, but she didn't. (= ... didn't phone.)

This type of ellipsis can include words that follow the verb phrase.

I was planning to go to Paris next week, but I can't.

(= ... I can't go to Paris next week.)

The same structures are possible with non-auxiliary *be* and *have*.

I thought she would be angry, and she was.

He says he hasn't any friends, but I know he has.

6 infinitives

We can use *to* instead of repeating a whole infinitive. For details, see 182.

Are you and Gillian getting married? ~ We hope to.

(= We hope to get married.)

I don't dance much now, but I used to a lot.

Sometimes a whole infinitive, including *to*, is left out.

Come when you want. (= ... when you want to come.)

Have a good time. ~ I'll try. (= I'll try to have a good time.)

7 comparative structures with *as* and *than*

We can leave out words after *as* and *than*, if the meaning is clear.

The weather isn't as good as last year. (= ... as it was last year.)

I found more blackberries than you. (= ... than you found.)

For missing subject or object after *as* and *than* (e.g. *as was expected*), see 581. ▶

8 question-word clauses

Clauses can be dropped after question words.

*Somebody's been stealing our flowers, but I don't know **who**.*

(= ... I don't know who's been stealing our flowers.)

*Become a successful writer. This book shows you **how**.*

9 *that* and relative pronouns

In an informal style, the conjunction *that* is often dropped (see 584); object relative pronouns can also be dropped (see 495.4).

*I knew (**that**) she didn't want to help me.*

*This is the restaurant (**which**) I was talking about.*

10 reduced relative structures: *the tickets available* etc

We can sometimes leave out a relative pronoun and the verb *be* before participles or adjectives such as *available*, *possible*. For details, see 498.10.

*Who's the girl **dancing** with your brother?* (= ... who is dancing ...)

*Please let me have all the tickets **available**.* (= ... that are available.)

11 *be* after conjunctions

Subject pronouns with forms of *be* can be left out after certain conjunctions, especially in a formal style.

*Start **when** ready.* (= ... when you are ready.)

***Though** intelligent, he was very poorly educated.*

(= Though he was intelligent ...)

***When** ordering, please send £1.50 for postage and packing.*

*Phone me **if** (it is) necessary. He had a small heart attack **while** asleep.*

*I'm enclosing my cheque for £50, **as** agreed. Leave in oven **until** cooked.*

12 prepositions

In an informal style, prepositions can be dropped in a few time expressions (see 451).

*See you (**on**) Monday night.*

*We're staying here (**for**) another three months.*

What time shall I come? (More natural than *At what time ...?*)

For cases like *We need a place to live (in)*, see 431.

13 pronouns after prepositions

In British English, pronoun objects can sometimes be dropped after prepositions. This happens, for example, when *have* or *with* are used in descriptive structures.

*My socks **have** got holes **in** (them).*

*I'd like a piece of toast **with** butter **on** (it).*

14 abbreviated styles

In certain styles, many or all non-essential words can be dropped. For details, see 1.

Take 500g butter and place in small saucepan.

Single man looking for flat Oxford area.

WOMAN WALKS ON MOON

178 ellipsis (2): with and, but and or

1 various kinds of word left out

When expressions are joined by *and*, *but* or *or*, we often leave out repeated words or phrases of various kinds.

a knife and (a) fork *antique (furniture) or modern furniture*
these men and (these) women *in France, (in) Germany or (in) Spain*
ripe apples and (ripe) pears *She can read, but (she) can't write.*
The Minister likes golf but (the Minister) hates fishing.
We drove (across America), rode (across America), flew (across America) and
walked across America.
She was poor but (she was) honest.
The food (is ready) and the drinks are ready.
Phil (washed the dishes) and Sally washed the dishes.

We can sometimes drop a verb that is repeated in a different form.

I have always paid my bills and I always will (pay . . .).

2 word order

Note that when two verbs, objects etc are the same, it is not always the second that is left out. We may have to leave out the first to avoid confusion, or to produce a simpler word order and sentence structure.

Cats (catch mice) and dogs catch mice. (NOT ~~*Cats catch mice and dogs.*~~)
I can (go) and will go.

In informal speech and writing, ellipsis does not usually interrupt the normal word order of a clause or sentence. Sentences like the following are typical of a more formal style.

Peter planned and Jane paid for the holiday. (Less formal: *Peter planned the holiday and Jane paid for it.*)
Kevin likes dancing and Annie athletics. (Less formal: *Kevin likes dancing and Annie likes athletics.*)
The children will carry the small boxes and the adults the large ones.
Jane went to Greece and Alice to Rome.
You seem, and she certainly is, ill.

3 other conjunctions

Ellipsis is not normally possible after other conjunctions besides *and*, *but* and *or*.

She didn't know where she was when she woke up. (NOT . . . ~~*when woke up.*~~)

However, ellipsis of subject pronouns with forms of *be* is possible in some cases (e.g. *if possible, when arriving*). See 261.6, 73.4, 411.6.

4 (and) then

In an informal style, ellipsis is sometimes possible after *then*, even if *and* is dropped.

Peter started first, (and) then Colin (started).

For singular or plural verbs after expressions with *and* or *or*, see 532.2.

For singular and plural verbs with *neither . . . nor*, see 373.

179 ellipsis (3): at the beginning of a sentence

1 words that can be left out

In informal spoken English we often leave out unstressed words at the beginning of a sentence if the meaning is clear without them. Words that can be left out include articles (*the, a/an*), possessives (*my, your* etc), personal pronouns (*I, you* etc), auxiliary verbs (*am, have* etc) and the preparatory subject *there*.

Car's running badly. (= The car's ...)

Wife's on holiday. (= My wife's ...)

Couldn't understand a word. (= I couldn't ...)

Must dash. (= I must dash.)

Won't work, you know. (= It won't work ...)

Seen Joe? (= Have you seen Joe?)

Keeping well, I hope? (= You're keeping well ...)

Nobody at home. (= There's nobody at home.)

Careful what you say. (= Be careful ...)

Be four pounds fifty. (= That'll be ...)

This structure is common in advertisements. Two real examples:

Thinking of postgraduate study? Call for a place now. (= Are you thinking ...?)

Speak a foreign language? Speak it better. (= Do you speak ...?)

2 unstressed forms of *be, will, would, have*

We do not usually drop words so as to begin sentences with unstressed forms of *be, will, would* or auxiliary *have* (though this sometimes happens in postcards, diary entries and other kinds of very informal writing).

I'm coming tomorrow. OR *Coming tomorrow.* (BUT NOT ~~*Am-coming tomorrow.*~~ *Am* is not stressed.)

I'll see you soon. OR *See you soon.* (BUT NOT ~~*Will-see-you-soon.*~~ *Will* is not stressed.)

Haven't seen him. (BUT NOT ~~*Have-seen-him.*~~ *Have* is not stressed.)

3 before pronouns: *You ready?*

Auxiliary verbs can be left out before personal pronouns except *I* and *it*.

You ready? (= Are you ready?)

She want something? (= Does she want something?)

(BUT NOT ~~*I-late?*~~ ~~*It-raining?*~~)

4 *Dutch, aren't you?*

Ellipsis is very common in sentences that have some sort of tag (see 487–488, 514) on the end, especially in British English.

Can't swim, myself. Like a cigar, I do. Dutch, aren't you?

Getting in your way, am I? Going on holiday, your kids?

180 ellipsis (4): in noun phrases

1 ellipsis after adjectives: *boiled, please*

A repeated noun can sometimes be dropped after an adjective, if the meaning is clear, especially when one is talking about common kinds of choice.

What kind of potatoes would you like? ~ Boiled (potatoes), please.

We haven't got any large eggs. Only small (eggs).

This often happens after superlatives.

I think I'll buy the cheapest.

Note that nouns are not normally dropped in other situations.

Poor little boy! (NOT ~~*Poor little!*~~)

The most important thing is to keep calm. (NOT ~~*The most important is to...*~~)

For other structures in which adjectives are used without nouns, see 17.

2 ellipsis after *this, numbers, possessives etc*

Nouns can also be dropped after most determiners (see 154), if the meaning is clear.

This is Helen's coat, and that (coat) is mine.

This also happens after numbers, nouns with possessive 's, *own* and (*an*)*other*.

I'm not sure how many packets I need, but I'll take two (packets) to start with.

Our train's the second (train) from this platform.

You take Pete's car, and I'll take Susie's (car).

Can I borrow your pen? ~ No, find your own (pen).

That beer went down fast. ~ Have another (beer).

3 well-known names

The last words of well-known names are often dropped.

She's playing the Beethoven with the London Philharmonic tomorrow night. (= ... the Beethoven violin concerto with the London Philharmonic Orchestra ...)

He's staying at the Hilton. (= ... the Hilton Hotel.)

We're going to see 'Hamlet' at the Mermaid. (= ... the Mermaid Theatre.)

When we talk about people's houses and shops, the words *house* and *shop* are often dropped (see 439.4).

We spent the weekend at John and Mary's.

Could you pick up some chops from the butcher's?

181 ellipsis (5): after auxiliary verbs

1 auxiliary instead of complete verb phrase

We can avoid repetition by using an auxiliary verb instead of a complete verb phrase, if the meaning is clear. The auxiliary verb usually has a 'strong' pronunciation (see 616), and contractions (see 143) are not normally used except in negatives. ▶

Get up. ~ I am /æm/. (= I am getting up.)

He said he'd write, but he hasn't. (= ... hasn't written.)

I'll come and see you when I can. (= ... can come and see you.)

Shall I tell him what I think? ~ I wouldn't if I were you.

Do can be used before ellipsis if there is no other auxiliary to repeat.

I may come to London. I'll phone you if I do.

He said he would arrive before seven, and he did.

Other words, as well as the rest of the verb phrase, can be left out after the auxiliary.

I can't see you today, but I can tomorrow. (= ... I can see you ...)

I've forgotten the address. ~ I have too.

You're not trying very hard. ~ I am.

You wouldn't have won if I hadn't helped you. ~ Yes, I would.

This also happens after non-auxiliary *be* and *have*.

I'm tired. ~ I am too.

Who's the driver? ~ I am.

Who has a dictionary? ~ I have.

2 short answers etc: *Yes, I have.*

Ellipsis is used regularly in short answers (see 517), reply questions (see 484) and question tags (see 487-488).

Have you finished? ~ Yes, I have.

I can whistle through my fingers. ~ Can you, dear?

You don't want to buy a car, do you?

3 *so am I* etc

Ellipsis also happens after *so* (see 541), *neither* and *nor* (see 374). Note the word order.

I've forgotten the address. ~ So have I.

She doesn't like olives, and neither do I.

4 ellipsis before complete form

Ellipsis normally happens when an expression is used for a second time, after the complete form has already been used once (see above examples).

However, it can sometimes happen the other way round. This is common in sentences beginning with *if*.

If you can, send me a postcard when you arrive.

If you could, I'd like you to help me this evening.

If you prefer, we can go tomorrow instead.

5 more than one auxiliary

When there is more than one auxiliary, ellipsis usually happens after the first.

You wouldn't have enjoyed the film. ~ Yes, I would. (= ... I would have enjoyed the film.)

However, more auxiliaries can be included. The first is stressed.

Could you have been dreaming? ~ I suppose I could / COULD have / COULD have been.

We often include a second auxiliary verb if it has not appeared before in the same form.

I think Mary should be told. ~ She has been. (More natural than ... She has.)

And we normally include a second auxiliary verb after a change of modal auxiliary.

Mary should be told. ~ She must be. (More natural than . . . *She must.*)

6 substitution with *do*

In British English, a main verb that is left out after an auxiliary can be replaced by *do*. For details, see 161.

Do you think he'll phone? ~ He might do. (AmE . . . *He might.*)

For *do so*, see 162.

182 ellipsis (6): infinitives

1 *to* used instead of whole infinitive

We can use *to* instead of the whole infinitive of a repeated verb (and following words), if the meaning is clear.

Are you and Gillian getting married? ~ We hope to.

Let's go for a walk. ~ I don't want to.

I don't dance much now, but I used to a lot.

Sorry I shouted at you. I didn't mean to.

Somebody ought to clean up the bathroom. ~ I'll ask John to.

Be and *have* (used for possession) are not usually dropped.

There are more flowers than there used to be. (NOT . . . ~~than there used to.~~)

She hasn't been promoted yet, but she ought to be. (NOT . . . ~~but she ought to.~~)

You've got more freckles than you used to have. (NOT ~~You've got more freckles than you used to.~~)

2 ellipsis of whole infinitive

In some cases the whole infinitive can be left out. This happens after nouns and adjectives.

He'll never leave home; he hasn't got the courage (to).

You can't force him to leave home if he's not ready (to).

It also happens after verbs which can stand alone without a following infinitive.

Can you start the car? ~ I'll try (to).

3 (*would*) *like*, *want* etc

We cannot usually leave out *to* after *would like/love/hate/prefer*, *want* and *choose*.

Are you interested in going to University? ~ I'd like to. (NOT . . . ~~I'd like.~~)

My parents encouraged me to study art, but I didn't want to. (NOT . . . ~~I didn't want.~~)

However, *to* is often dropped after *want*, and almost always after *like*, when these are used after certain conjunctions – for instance *when*, *if*, *what*, *as*.

Come when you want (to).

I'll do what I like.

Stay as long as you like.