

Good Writing Practice

Syntactic structure

Ellipsis: Noun Clause

Introduction

Ellipsis is the absence of a portion of a syntactic unit in a stylistic effort to be succinct. For example, the ellipsis of *that*, in a noun clause occurring frequently in research writing, often is only a minor distraction (e.g., *Smith hypothesised ^ protein A is insulin*), because the meaning is evident when the verb *is* is adjacent to the subject *protein*.

That initiating a noun clause is a complementiser (e.g., *Smith hypothesised that protein A is insulin*), and the noun clause functions as a complement. (A complement completes the meaning of a grammatical unit such as the direct object of a verb). However, there are instances whereby comprehension is impeded because of over-ellipsis (ellipsis).

The examples in this article are organised according to sections of a journal article (Experimental and Contextual) and their conceptual components.

Experimental section

Part 1 – Results section: data-based observation

Example: elliptical noun clause in an “it . . . that” pattern

It was shown by using fibroblast growth factors (FGFs) in explant cultures ^ the visceral endoderm could be induced to express the liver-specific genes albumin and a-fetoprotein.

Revision (de-ellipsis)

*It was shown by using fibroblast growth factors (FGFs) in explant cultures **that** the visceral endoderm could be induced to express the liver-specific genes albumin and a-fetoprotein.*

Notes

The *it . . . that* pattern is useful to delay placement of an extra-long noun clause from the subject position of a sentence. However, in the example, the *that* is missing, so the reader’s expectation of the sentence pattern is not fulfilled.

In another type of pattern, such as *given that*, *that* is often ellipsed probably with just a momentary dissonance effect, because the reader automatically supplies the *that*. As evidence, *given*

and *given that* are used interchangeably as a subordinating conjunction meaning *accepting that*: *A video sequence with better quality was transmitted by the VBR channel than by the CBR channel, given (that) the same average rates were used in both channels.*

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: hypothesis

Example: elliptical noun clause in an “it . . . that” pattern

It is possible ^ the rate of bone resorption is significantly less for the indomethacin-treated rats.

Revision (thematisation)

The rate of bone resorption may be significantly less for the indomethacin-treated rats.

Notes

In the revision, in addition to replacement of the complementiser *that* (see Part 2) another revision option is indicated: thematisation. *It . . . that* sentences, while providing sentence variety and emphasising commentary (e.g., *possibility*), delay the thematic sentence subject and the main verb of the sentence.

Part 2 – Introduction section: hypothesis

Example: elliptical noun clause as a subject complement

One possibility is ^ a large proportion of the vitamin was bound to protein.

Revision (de-ellipsis)

*One possibility is **that** a large proportion of the vitamin was bound to protein.*

Notes

There is a subject-to-verb three-word gap in the noun clause, but the explicit logical relation between the subject *one possibility* and the subject complement *a large proportion* minimises the omission of *that* on immediate comprehension. The noun clause functioning as the subject complement (a renaming of the subject

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possibility) can be tested. That is, the subject complement and subject can be interchanged: *That a large proportion of the vitamin was bound to protein is one possibility*. Although useful as a test, placement of a noun clause into the subject position is an infrequent sentence pattern, probably because the overlong subject delays the main verb of the sentence.

Part 3 – Discussion section: hypothesis support

Example: elliptical noun clause object in a participial phrase

These investigations enabled concluding ^ the experimental conditions necessary to reduce the ejection force were fulfilled.

Revision (de-ellipsis)

*These investigations enabled concluding **that** the experimental conditions necessary to reduce the ejection force were fulfilled.*

Notes

In the example, there are six words between the subject of the noun clause *conditions* and the verb were *fulfilled* – a sufficient number to recognise that something interferes with the flow of the sentence pattern. In support, if the words *necessary to reduce the ejection force* are deleted between subject of the noun clause and its verb, the conceptual gap is minimised, and the necessity for *that* is reduced: *These investigations enabled concluding the experimental conditions were fulfilled*.

Summary

The distribution of *that* is extensive in journal articles appearing both in the Experimental (Results) and Contextual sections (Introduction, Discussion). Overall, ellipsis impedes immediate comprehension when the verb of the noun clause

is too distant from the subject. Another consideration is nonthematic focus whereby the *it* ... *that* in a sentence delays rather than places the noun in the subject position – a lack of thematisation.

The necessity for a *that* fronting a noun clause appears directly related to the distancing in the noun clause of the verb from the subject; that is, the greater the distance the more the necessity. However, to reflexively insert a *that* regardless of the distance is usually the selected option when the two possibilities are compared. Such routine insertion is limited, because an excess of intra-sentence *that*'s are distracting, necessitating a selective insertion of *that* where it is most necessary.

Addendum

Another perspective for not using *that* (in all of the revisions above) is redundancy. Such over-usage of *that* may be analogous to over-usage of *the*. Even though grammatically correct, any over-usage, especially in the same sentence, can become distracting. Consequently, a hierarchy of speci-

ficacy can be applied: eliminate the least specific usage.**

The redundancy of *that* is emphasised when the complementiser *that* occurs along with *that* as the relative pronoun (marked below to

*These would be the vitamins you were taking at the time you became pregnant not the vitamins the doctor suggested you take when you learn **that**** you are pregnant.*

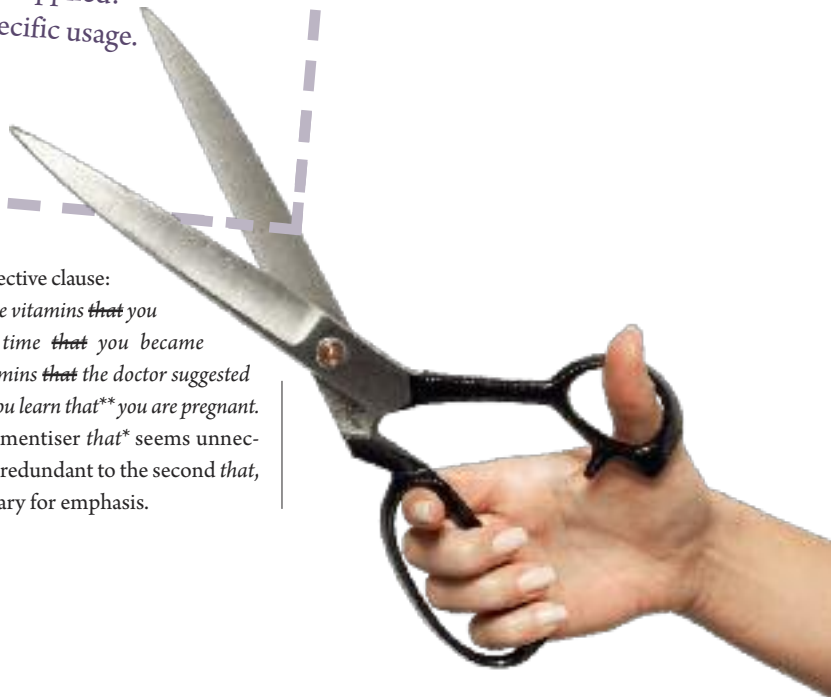
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be deleted) in an adjective clause:

These would be the vitamins ~~that~~ you were taking at the time ~~that~~ you became pregnant not the vitamins ~~that~~ the doctor suggested ~~that~~ you take when you learn ~~that~~** you are pregnant.*

The first complementiser *that** seems unnecessary because it is redundant to the second *that*, which seems necessary for emphasis.



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