**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 ellipse 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: database 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 with just a momentary dissonance effect, because the reader automatically supplies the that. As evidence, given

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

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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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