

## Ron's Guide to Mastering Pesky Grammatical Devices and Constructions

### • *Interrupting elements within a sentence*

Information inserted into the sentence that is not essential to the core meaning should be set apart with appropriate punctuation, depending on the nature of the interruption. Commas, dashes, or parentheses are used, at the discretion of the author, according to the following guidelines:

Nonessential modifying phrases are generally set off with commas. Abrupt shifts in thought—my God these pop up everywhere, in brains and in the prose we read—are denoted with dashes. Parentheses are used to set apart “by-the-way” informative interruptions (think of them as “asides”), extraneous material, tangentially related mental wanderings, or even the intrusive voice of a different narrator.

Sophie struggled to think of everything to pack for the picnic: peaches, Ritz crackers, garlic-stuffed olives—he does like these doesn't he?—smoked salmon, and of course the wine.

The cheerleaders, who wore red bloomers to match their headbands, gathered at the end zone.

The cheerleaders who plan to go on the field trip are supposed to meet in the cafeteria.

Carl struggled underneath the hood, trying to break loose the rusted exhaust manifold bolts of the old Ford that had been left to him by his father (a man who revered old cars as proof that everything was better in his day, those days leading up to and just before the attack on Pearl Harbor) until blood ran from his knuckles. Carl finally straightened, removing himself from the shadow of the curved sheet metal. “Damn this old heap and damn that old man to hell. He's trying to punish me from beyond the grave.”

### • *The ellipsis*

This device is used to show, especially in exposition and scholarly writing, where content has been omitted (usually) from a quoted source. It is also used frequently in creative writing, especially dialogue, to indicate a pause or a confused, balky speaker. The ellipsis consists of three periods with a space before the first one, after the last one, and between each one. When

Ron Yates 10/21/15 9:24 AM

**Comment [1]:** No space before or after the em dash.

Ron Yates 10/21/15 9:25 AM

**Comment [2]:** The adjective clause is not essential to the core meaning of the sentence. Commas are necessary.

Ron Yates 10/21/15 9:25 AM

**Comment [3]:** The adjective clause is essential to the core meaning of the sentence. No commas.

Ron Yates 10/21/15 9:30 AM

**Comment [4]:** Parenthetical asides can be quite lengthy. Faulkner's went on sometimes for pages. Generally, though, if the parenthetical matter is removed, an uninterrupted, grammatical sentence will remain.

the ellipsis is used at the end of a sentence, a fourth dot is used (think of it as an actual period ending the sentence), directly after the last word. The three spaced-out dots follow.

Sophie winced at Carl's scraped and swollen knuckles, then at the scowl on his face after he bit into one of the olives. She said, "I'm sorry . . . I mean, I thought you liked—"

"Why the hell would you think that? These things taste like—"

"Now hold on just a minute, mister man! You told me you loved exotic things. . . . And besides, you shouldn't say bad words."

"Oh shoot, Sophie . . . I mean . . . heck, I don't know what I mean. It's just that something—I can't explain it—comes over me when I bite into plump round things, especially when they're salty. . . ."

He seemed to be forming a thought, so Sophie waited. Finally she said, "Here try this. It's plump and round too. Maybe it'll get the taste out . . . and I'm sorry I snapped at you—dang, your knuckles sure are beat up! What happened?" As she handed him the peach, her fingers caressed his injured hands.

"It don't matter," he said. "Just my old man. He was a damn—sorry—a *darn* fool. Wanted to punish me some more I guess. Stipulated in the will that I should fix the motor, keep that old heap in the family forever." He cupped the fruit in both hands. "I love peaches—the soft, fuzzy feel, the plumpness, the juice. They remind me—"

"I know, right? They remind me of that too! Let's don't fight anymore . . . about silly things like olives, and salt, and garlic . . . or old cars—especially old cars and old men who inflict pain even after they're dead. Let's just—"

"Let's just what?" He took a big bite. Sophie watched the juice running down the corners of his mouth. Then she bent toward him and placed her red lips on his wet ones. He dropped the peach and caressed her face with his rough hands.

• *Exercises for mastery*

Begin practice today by using these devices in your own writing whenever appropriate to advance your narrative and develop character. Don't use them, though, just to show off. That tendency will develop as your confidence and skill grow. Remember, in writing less is more!

Ron Yates 10/21/15 10:37 AM

**Comment [5]:** You can begin a sentence with a conjunction if you feel like it.

Ron Yates 10/21/15 10:42 AM

**Comment [6]:** When trying to capture regional dialect, be careful with phonetic spellings. Avoid words that aren't in the dictionary. And if you use "smart quotes," be sure they're turned the right way. This is actually an apostrophe. They are always turned like this. Inside (single) quotes, though, can be turned either up or down.

Ron Yates 10/21/15 11:18 AM

**Comment [7]:** This is a contraction of two actual words. Here it is used to represent the dialect of an individual with limited education and sophistication. A few light touches can go a long way toward developing character. Nobody writes in "dialect" any more, that is phonetic (mis)spellings that try to precisely capture the sounds of regional dialect. It's just too distracting. Twain and other regional writers of realism killed the practice by overusing it.

Ron Yates 10/21/15 10:43 AM

**Comment [8]:** A quotation mark turned this way closes the quote. Turned up the other way opens or begins the quote.