

‘What the—? Could it be ...?’

Dialogue in fiction doesn’t normally replicate the meandering, poorly constructed sentences that most of us produce in real life. If it did, it would soon get pretty tiresome.

But there will be times when you want to show that your speaker has produced an incomplete sentence, and you will probably also want to convey why this has happened. Here’s how you do it.

Use an em dash (a long dash) to show that the character’s speech has been cut off, perhaps because something has suddenly caught their attention, or because another character is interrupting, as in this example:

‘But I thought you—’

‘It doesn’t matter what you thought!’

(To insert an em dash in a Word document, go to Insert > Symbol > More Symbols > Special Characters.)

If your speaker trails off in doubt or confusion, or because they’ve fallen asleep, use the ellipsis. This is three dots that you should think of as a single unit (so make sure the dots don’t get split up over two lines).

‘Everything started so well, but then ...’

You might want to use an ellipsis in the middle of dialogue:

‘She was wearing a red dress ... or perhaps it was purple ...’

You can use a question mark or an exclamation mark after the ellipsis where appropriate:

‘Would you mind very much if I ...?’

An ellipsis is always formed of three dots. Even if you want to convey a very long and dramatic pause, it’s still only three dots.

For more information about the ellipsis and how to use it in quotations, read [this helpful post from Beverley Sykes](#).