

# Missing the Point: The effect of punctuation on reading performance



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## Abstract

Any coherent theory of language comprehension must account for the ways in which different informational sources are combined in the analysis and interpretation of language input. Until recently, punctuation has received very little attention in psycholinguistics, even though punctuation marks are perhaps among the most important structural elements in written language. The major aim of the current project was to examine whether punctuation, in the form of commas, provides a dependable and effective cue for facilitating reading performance—as measured by reading speed and comprehension. Further, the relationship between the reading-ability of participants and the effectiveness of punctuation was explored. The notion of redundancy in punctuation, and whether the comma exerts a similar influence on both simple- and difficult-to-process sentences was also considered.

Both the plausibility of potential attachments and the length of ambiguous regions in sentences have been shown to influence the severity of misanalysis experienced by readers. The way in which appropriate punctuation affects the impact of these factors in processing and comprehension of ambiguous sentences was investigated. An additional aim of the research was to determine whether the previously observed disambiguating effects of commas could be simply credited to clausal segmentation. The findings indicated that commas do more than simply physically segmenting text. Commas were observed to have a strong and structurally dependent influence on sentence processing—particularly with skilled readers—successfully averting the need for major reanalysis, either by eliminating misanalysis altogether or activating rapid repair.

A variety of syntactically relevant constraints are likely to be accessible, which could be used to inform parsing commitments. What the constraints are, and how and when they are used, remains an important and largely unresolved question. The current findings clearly suggest that punctuation is one such constraint. Moreover, the effectiveness of punctuation as a syntactic constraint appears strongly tied to reading-ability. The results suggest that models of sentence parsing and comprehension that do not include a role for punctuation are incomplete.

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