



Hal's Reading Diary ? November 2009

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[Roger Mills](#) [1]

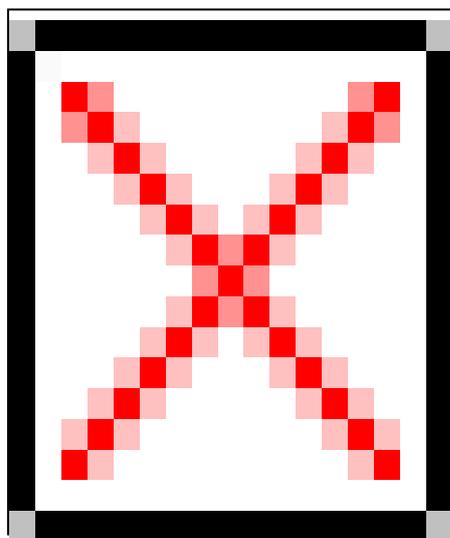
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Article Category:

Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

Byline:

Roger Mills reflects on the importance of punctuation.



Hal is reading words with growing confidence but punctuation is ignored. Does it matter? His father, psychodynamic counsellor Roger Mills, reflects on its importance for young readers.

What is it that makes someone a fluent reader? Until recently I had always assumed that it was basically a question of recognising words. Know the words and you sail smoothly through the sentence, the paragraph, the page. Simple.

But is word recognition actually all there is to it? A couple of nights ago Hal was reading one of the **Astrosaurs** books to me. He was making pretty good progress, reading quite quickly and recognising most words even quite difficult ones. But though the reading was speedy it wasn't what I would call fluent. In Hal's version each word got the same emphasis, and the same weight, like a piece of music made up entirely of crotchets. The words were right, but what was missing was the way that in fluent reading emphasis and tempo shift all the time, embodying the meaning of what is being said.

A major contributor to Hal's problem, I soon realised, was the fact that he was paying very little attention to the punctuation. Quite often he would read right through a full stop. Or he might miss the fact that quotation marks showed that someone had just started speaking. Reading in this way, an example of a typical Hal sentence sounded like this: ?Gipsy ? gulped ? how ? long ? have ? we ? got?. The printed version ?Gipsy gulped. ?How long have we got??? is a very different experience if you pay attention to the punctuation. The full stop after ?gulped? invites a dramatic pause emphasising Gipsy's shock. ?How long have we got?? invites a quicker reading, the speed conveying Gipsy's anxiety.

Thinking about it I started to see that ignoring punctuation involved other losses as well. The structural signs of punctuation help you anticipate the kinds of meaning that are coming up. If it is quotation marks you know that someone is saying something so it is different from descriptive writing. If there is a phrase between two commas in the middle of a sentence it is probably a subordinate clause giving you a bit more detail about someone or something. Pick

up these signs and your reading will flow faster because you know the kind of information you are about to be given. Know the kind of information and, I would argue, you see the words more accurately than you would if they were being shown to you individually, without punctuation.

I've often mentioned in this diary the fact that Hal loves the drama of stories but doesn't love reading. It saddens me because I am sure that he will get so much out of books once he does become a fluent reader but this has yet to come. Till now we've only focused on getting words right and haven't been too bothered about punctuation seeing it as a sideshow compared to the heavy lifting of word recognition. This week's experiences have induced a major rethink on this one. I think we will be looking very carefully at full stops from now on.

Astrosaurs titles by Steve Cole are published by Red Fox.



[Hal 2009 + Ropes.jpg](#) [3]

Hal on a trip - 2009

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