

The power of Peter Piper: How alliteration enhances poetry, prose, and memory

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From nursery rhymes to Shakespearian sonnets, alliterations have always been an important aspect of poetry whether as an interesting aesthetic touch or just as something fun to read. But a recent study suggests that this literary technique is useful not only for poetry but also for memory.

In several experiments, researchers R. Brooke Lea of Macalester College, David N. Rapp of Northwestern University, Andrew Elfenbein and Russell Swinburne Romine of University of Minnesota and Aaron D. Mitchel of the Pennsylvania State University had participants read works of poetry and prose with alliterative sentences to show the importance of repetitive consonants on memory.

Previous studies have shown that alliteration can act as a better tool for memory than both imagery and meaning, however the reason for this has never been established. In their experiments the researchers hoped to demonstrate that alliterations retrieve similar sounding words and phrases from a person's memory, making it a useful tool for poetry comprehension and memorization.

In one experiment, a group of participants read aloud poems with similar alliterative sounds throughout it while other participants had to read aloud poems with either different alliterative sounds or no alliterations at all. A second experiment had the same conditions, except that participants read a series of poems silently. The final experiment had participants read a work of narrative prose, also with the same conditions in regards to alliterative sounds in the literature. In each experiment,

participants had to recall both content and thematic aspects from the works that they read.

The results of all three experiments underscore the interaction between alliteration and memory. In each of the experiments, participants in the same-alliteration condition were able to recall the most from the literature they read.

"In our experiments, concepts presented early in a poem (or prose passage) were more available when alliterative sounds overlapped between lines than when there was no overlap," the researchers reported.

Additionally, the results of the other experiments, published in the July issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, show that alliteration's affect on memory is not lessened by either the type of work it is used in or whether or not the literature is read silently or aloud. Most importantly, the results demonstrate alliteration only works as a tool for memory when the alliterative sounds are similar; while the participants in the same-alliteration condition did well in each experiment, those in the other two conditions had similar, less impressive results.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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