One sentence two readings

How can punctuation change the way an invented message is understood?

Use the same words to compare direct address with the object of a sentence.

Investigate | 10–20 minutes, or one small comparison | Scrap paper and a pencil or pen, The supplied original model; no account, purchase or online search needed

Start here Write two messages about an imaginary robot: Let's draw, Pip. and Let's draw Pip.



A comma changes Pip's role

1 Keep the words fixed

Both messages use Let's, draw and Pip in the same order. Only the comma changes.

2 Read the first

Let's draw, Pip. addresses Pip: it invites the fictional robot to join the drawing. Pip is the listener.

3 Read the second

Let's draw Pip. proposes drawing a picture of Pip. Pip is what the drawing will show.

4 Make the task explicit

Write a short explanation or add a sketch for each reading. You can compare silently; no particular voice or accent is required.

Original example Pip the invented robot

Pip is a fictional robot, not a real person or an existing character.

• With the comma: Pip is being addressed and invited to draw.

• Without the comma: Pip is the subject to be depicted in a drawing.

• A small punctuation mark changes the grammatical role of the same name.

What this example can show Context and speech can add clues too. This pair illustrates one English sentence distinction, not a rule for every language.

A different way

Sort the two messages beside supplied sketches, point to the comma, or ask someone else to read them. Speaking is optional.

If you want to go further

Try Let's build, Pip. and Let's build Pip. Explain the two tasks before deciding whether punctuation alone gives enough context.

Something to notice

Which role changed when I moved from one reading to the other?

Read or explore more

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https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation/commas

Australian Government Style Manual Sentences

https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/writing-and-designing-content/clear-language-and-writing-style/sentences