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VIDEO VERSUS TEXT SPOILERS AND ENJOYMENT OF NARRATIVES

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Abstract – Common knowledge suggests that spoilers ruin stories for people—but is this really the case? In the current study, we investigated the effect of spoilers and narrative formats (video vs. text) on college students' enjoyment of narratives. In this 2 (format: text, video) × 2 (spoiler: present, not) factorial study, Qualtrics randomly assigned 63 undergraduate students to one of four groups: short film without spoiler, short film with spoiler, text without spoiler, or text with spoiler. After either reading the short story or watching the short film, participants filled out a survey to measure their perceived enjoyment of the narrative. We expected to find that participants who watched a video with a spoiler would enjoy the video less than those that watched the video with no spoiler and those that read the text with a spoiler or without a spoiler. We found that spoilers did not reduce participants' enjoyment of narratives and that there was no interaction between format and spoilers. However, we found a significant interaction between spoilers and format on participants' reported processing fluency/plot comprehension, which could potentially explain our results. Finally, participants reported that they actively dislike and try to avoid spoilers, furthering the idea that people often over-forecast the spoiler effect. Spoilers are increasingly relevant and hard to avoid in today's highly connected and media-focused society. Although research on the psychological effect of spoilers is limited and inconsistent, our findings suggest that people may overestimate the effect of spoilers on narrative enjoyment.

Keywords: spoilers, stories, amusement, media format, narratives

Imagine waiting for hours in line to watch Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back (Kershner, 1980) in theaters, only to have two men in a pickup truck drive by, loudly exclaiming, "Darth Vader is Luke's father". My father (CR) experienced this exact event on the opening night of the movie in 1980. He ultimately enjoyed the movie, despite the spoiler. However, he often recounts the exasperation he felt that day. Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011, 2013) define spoilers as revealed plot developments that affect overall enjoyment or feelings of anticipation. As with the case of my father, spoilers often cause frustration. As the name suggests, many people feel that spoilers can ruin their enjoyment of a narrative. However, this may not be the case.

Since 2011, there has been increased interest in research on the effect of narrative spoilers on participant's enjoyment of text and media, known as the spoiler effect. Much of the recent research on the spoiler effect stems from a pair of articles published by Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011, 2013). Originally, Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) concluded that spoilers do not ruin stories and that they increase enjoyment. They suggested that improved understanding of the narrative and increased anticipation of upcoming plot devices enhanced viewers' experiences. In a follow-up study, they replicated the finding and found that spoilers increase enjoyment by improving processing fluency (Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013).

Previous spoiler studies frequently point to the idea that improved processing fluency leads to greater narrative enjoyment (e.g., Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2018; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013; Levine et al., 2016). Processing fluency is a subjective measure of an observer's ability to parse information (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). Typically, higher levels processing fluency correlate with increased positive evaluations of a subject (Rober et al., 2004). In the context of spoiler research, processing fluency is synonymous with plot comprehension (e.g., how easy it is to follow the narrative). Put simply, the belief is that spoilers make it easier for participants to understand the plot. An important consideration to make when examining processing fluency in conjunction with spoilers is that (in theory) the effect of processing fluency on enjoyment scales directly with the complexity of the narrative. The effect on simple stories may be small or nonexistent,

while the effect on more complex stories is more prominent (Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013). Whereas seeing a spoiler for simple children's stories such as Goodnight Moon and The Very Hungry Caterpillar may not affect one's ability to process the narrative, seeing a spoiler for more complex, intricate, or nonlinear stories like those of the mystery-thriller book/film Fight Club or the drama-suspense film Inception could help to contextualize some of the more convoluted narrative elements.

More recent studies corroborate the idea that spoilers may not affect narrative enjoyment (Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). For example, Johnson and Rosenbaum (2018) state that spoilers have little to no effect on participants' perceived amusement. Later, Johnson et al. (2020) found that those who enjoy the horror genre may find increased enjoyment when experiencing scary or suspenseful plot information before watching. The authors hypothesized that those viewers enjoyed the increased anticipation the spoiler created (Johnson et al., 2020). Past research shows that making predictions about an unknown outcome significantly decreases participants' perceived enjoyment of an event, and removing the unknown factor eliminates this negative effect (Mandel & Nowlis, 2008).

Not all contemporary studies replicate the neutral or positive effect of spoilers. Multiple recent studies suggest that spoilers decrease participants' enjoyment (Daniel & Katz, 2019; Johnson & Rosenbaum 2015; Levine et al., 2016; Yan & Tsang, 2016). Research points towards several factors that could explain these findings, including the location of the spoiler within the narrative (e.g., beginning, middle, or end), the narrative delivery medium, the method of measuring participants' enjoyment, and participants' preexisting beliefs about the spoiler effect. For instance, researchers testing the spoiler effect on different measures of engagement, such as perceived fun, suspense, and overall enjoyment found that spoilers lowered participants' ratings of each of these categories (Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2015). In another study, researchers found that the method of presentation of a narrative influences the spoiler effect. Whereas spoilers did not affect participants' enjoyment of text, they significantly reduced participants' enjoyment of television shows (Daniel & Katz, 2019). Additionally, research shows that participants will go to great lengths to avoid spoilers for narratives they enjoy, regardless of the strength of the spoiler effect (Maxwell, 2022).

We are interested in the effects of spoilers on college students' enjoyment of narratives, and how these effects will interact with different forms of media. Previous research suggests that spoilers decrease enjoyment for video stimuli but not necessarily text stimuli (Daniel & Katz, 2019; Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2015). We predicted that if a group of participants watched a video with a spoiler, then they would enjoy the video less than a group that watched the video with no spoiler and groups that read the text with a spoiler or without a spoiler. This is relevant in today's social media-focused society, where spoilers are increasingly difficult to avoid.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 64 college students (18 years & older) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses in the fall of 2022 at a small midwestern university. Participants reported their age (M = 20.64, SD = 5.01), gender (52 women, 10 men, 2 non-binary) classification (37 freshman, 10 sophomores, 9 juniors, 8 seniors) and race/ethnicity (54 Caucasian, 7 Hispanic, 3 Latino/a/e/x, 3 Black, 3 Asian/Polynesian/Indian). Recruitment instructions specified that participants must bring their cell phone and a pair of earphones. Participants possibly earned course credit for their participation, but their instructors made other alternatives available. We obtained our participants via Psychology Department Research Pool sign-up in SONA (participant pool management software).

Materials

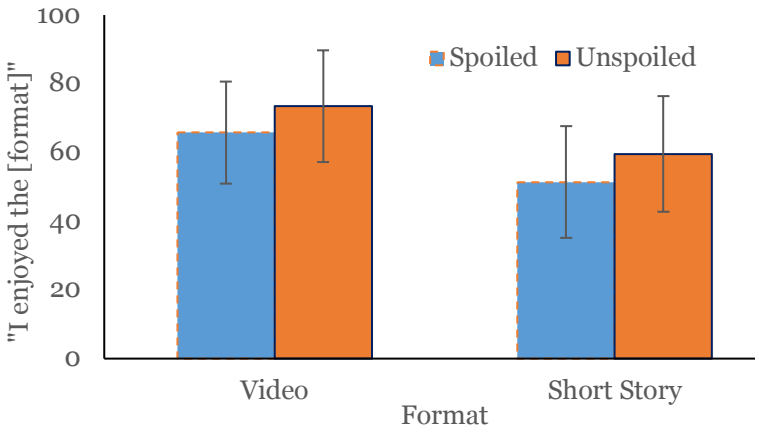
"To Build a Fire" by Jack London is a short story about a man exploring the Yukon in freezing temperatures. After falling into a pool of water, the man fails to build a fire and freezes to death. A shortened version of this story is 5176 words (London, 2008). "To Build a Fire" by Nexus Studios is a faithful animated film adaptation of London's short story. The video is 12 minutes and 59 seconds in length (London, 2008; Nexus Studios, 2016).

The video and text conditions each had two separate prompts to introduce the media. The non-spoiler prompt read, "Below, you will see [description of media]. Please [watch the video/read the story] in its entirety before continuing to the next slide." The spoiler prompt read, "Below, you will see [description of media]. This story follows a man and his dog in a frozen environment. After falling into a frigid pool of water, the man fails to build a fire. The man attempts to kill his canine companion for warmth but fails to do so. Ultimately, because of his failures, the man freezes to death. Please [watch the video/read the story] in its entirety before continuing to the next slide."

Depending on the assigned spoiler condition the Story Survey had either eight (no spoiler) or nine

Figure 1

Mean Enjoyment Ratings Across Conditions



Note. Mean perceived enjoyment scores by participants who either read a short story without a spoiler (n = 14), read a short story with a spoiler (n = 15), watched a short video without a spoiler (n = 16), or watched a video with a spoiler (n = 18). Error bars show 95% confidence intervals for the mean estimates. Higher scores indicate more enjoyment.

(spoiler) items. All groups completed eight slider-scale items designed to evaluate participants' perceptions of the story (e.g., "I felt transported into the story" where 0 = not at all and 100 = absolutely). The spoiler condition surveys contained one additional slider scale item, "I felt irritated after being exposed to the ending of the story," where 0 = not at all and 100 = absolutely. Within the Story Survey, we used the slider scale item, "I enjoyed the [format: short video/short story]" (0 = not at all, 100 = absolutely) to measure participants' narrative enjoyment and, "The plot was easy to follow" (0 = not at all, 100 = absolutely) to measure participants' perceived processing fluency (see Appendix for survey items). The Demographic Survey contained four items (age, gender, student classification, race/ethnicity).

Design and Procedure

We obtained IRB approval prior to conducting any procedures of this 2 (format: text, video) × 2 (spoiler: present, not) factorial study. We read the informed consent form aloud as participants followed along in Qualtrics (a secure web-based survey-building program). Qualtrics randomly assigned participants to one of four groups: short film without spoiler, short film with spoiler, text without spoiler, or text with spoiler. Participants then read their assigned prompt, before either reading the short story or watching the short film. Then, participants completed the Story Survey items, followed by the Demographic Survey. Lastly, participants read the debriefing statement.

Results

To test our hypothesis, we used two independent variables: the format (video/short story) of the story we presented to the participants and the presence of a spoiler (present/not present). The dependent variable was the participants' enjoyment of the video/short story. We calculated mean and standard deviations of the enjoyment slider scale, "I enjoyed the [format]" for each of the groups (Figure 1). We compared the enjoyment scores for each of the four groups by using a 2 (spoiler condition: spoiler, non-spoiler) × 2 (format: video, short story) completely randomized factorial ANOVA. For analyses with significant main effects or interactions ($p < .05$), we calculated simple effects using one-way ANOVAs and determined the effect size with partial η^2. We expected to find that participants who watched a video with a spoiler would enjoy the video less than a group that watched the video with no spoiler and groups that read the text with a spoiler or without a spoiler.

The main effect of format was not significant, $F(1, 59) = 3.33$, $p = .073$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. The levels of enjoyment for the video group ($M = 69.89$, $SD = 30.86$, $n = 34$) were not significantly different from the levels of enjoyment for the short story group ($M = 55.49$, $SD = 31.11$, $n = 29$; see Figure 1). The main effect of spoilers was not significant, $F(1, 59) = 1.08$, $p = .30$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. The levels for the spoiler group ($M = 58.59$, $SD = 33.4$, $n = 33$) were not significantly different from the non-spoiled group ($M = 66.79$, $SD = 29.34$, $n = 30$). The interaction of format and spoiler presence was also not significant, $F(1, 59) < 0.01$, $p = .99$, partial $\eta^2 < .01$. In other words, story format and spoiler presence did not affect college student's enjoyment of the video/text.

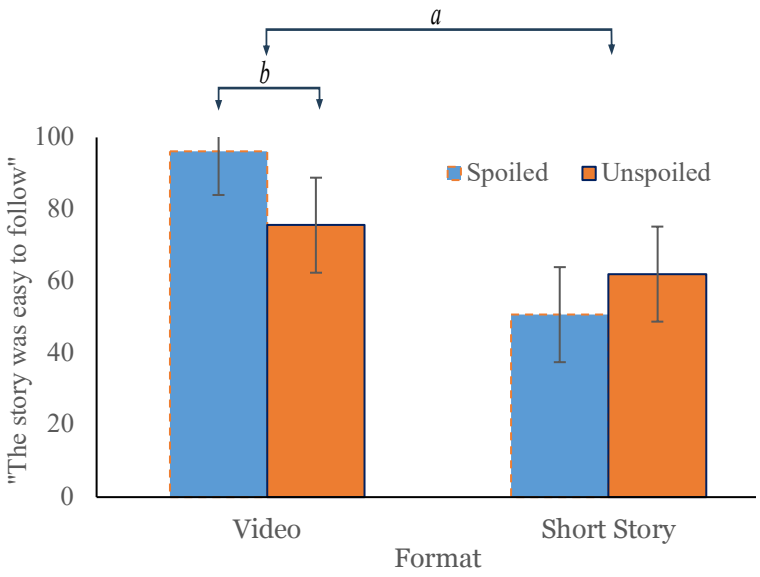
We also conducted exploratory analyses on the effect of spoilers and format on processing fluency. Although we did not make *a priori* hypotheses about processing fluency, previous research suggests that spoilers might increase processing fluency, thereby affecting enjoyment. The main effect of format was significant, $F(1, 60) = 20.78$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .26$. The levels of plot comprehension for the video conditions ($M = 86.76$, $SD = 31.21$, $n = 33$) were significantly higher than the levels of plot comprehension for the short story conditions ($M = 56.37$, $SD = 31.21$, $n = 30$). In other words, participants in the video condition found the plot easier to follow than those in the text condition. There

was no main effect of spoilers of spoilers on plot comprehension, $F(1, 60) = 0.51$, $p < .26$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Further analyses revealed a significant interaction between format and spoiler presence $F(1, 60) = 5.65$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. Probing the interaction revealed a simple effect of spoilers on participants in the video condition, $F(1, 59) = 5.24$, $p = .03$. Specifically, those in the spoiler condition rated their plot comprehension as higher ($M = 75.60$, $SD = 7.94$) than those in the non-spoiled condition ($M = 68.80$, $SD = 30.74$). There was no simple effect of spoilers on plot comprehension of participants in the text condition, $F(1, 59) = 1.46$, $p = .23$. See Figure 2. Put simply, participants who saw a spoiler in the video condition reported higher plot comprehension than those in the video condition who did not see a spoiler. In the text condition, however, spoilers did not affect the reported plot comprehension of participants.

We also measured participants' attitudes towards spoilers—including irritation after experiencing a plot spoiler, belief that spoilers reduce enjoyment, and spoiler avoidance. We collected these data by utilizing a 0-100 slider scale and analyzed them via descriptive statistics. Participants reported minor irritation after exposure to plot spoilers in the study ($M = 38.67$, $SD = 25.70$, $n = 30$). They also largely believed that plot spoilers reduce their enjoyment of narratives ($M = 59.95$, $SD = 31.79$, $n = 60$) and reported that they actively attempt to avoid plot spoilers ($M = 67.92$, $SD = 30.21$, $n = 63$). Essentially, participants carry a negative attitude towards spoilers and actively try to avoid them regardless of their actual effect on enjoyment.

Figure 2

Mean Comprehension Ratings Across Conditions



Note. Mean comprehension ratings by participants who either read a short story without a spoiler ($n = 14$), read a short story with a spoiler ($n = 15$), watched a short video without a spoiler ($n = 15$), or watched a video with a spoiler ($n = 18$). Error bars show 95% confidence intervals for the mean estimates. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-reported plot comprehension. Italicized lowercase letters indicate a statistically significant relationship ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to see if spoilers negatively affected college students' enjoyment of stories and whether the format of the story influenced the spoiler effect. We hypothesized that participants who watched a video with a spoiler would enjoy the video less than a group that watched the video with no spoiler and groups that read the text with a spoiler or without a spoiler. Upon collecting and analyzing data, we found that spoilers did not reduce students' enjoyment of the short story or video. These findings do not support our original hypothesis.

We developed our design with the goal of combining elements from several previous studies. For example, the first study that sparked academic interest in spoilers had college students read a short story (with or without a spoiler), then rate their enjoyment (Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2011). Future replication attempts stuck to a similar format but changed elements such as the genre and format of the stories (Daniel & Katz, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020; Yan & Tsang, 2016). Daniel and Katz (2019) compared the effect of spoilers on enjoyment of short stories versus television shows. However, they did not use the same stories across conditions (Daniel & Katz, 2019). We wanted our study to be a direct comparison of the effect of spoilers on video versus text, which is why we elected to use the same narrative for all conditions. Additionally, whereas many of the existing studies on spoilers utilized Likert-type scales for data collection (e.g., Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2018; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2011; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013), we elected to use slider scales. We did so to allow for greater freedom of choice in participants' answers.

Ultimately, we did not find a statistically significant difference between groups that read a short story with or without

a spoiler and groups that watched a short film with or without a spoiler. These results reflect the studies that found no negative effect of spoilers (Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2011; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013). However, based on our results, we were also unable to recreate the increase in enjoyment shown in some studies (Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2011; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013). Our results were unable to replicate any study that found a significant negative effect of spoilers (Daniel & Katz, 2019; Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2015; Levine et al., 2016; Yan & Tsang, 2016). We were also unable to replicate findings which found that format (video, television, text, etc.) moderates the effect of spoilers (Daniel & Katz, 2019).

However, we found that plot comprehension produced significant results. While spoilers alone had no effect, narrative format and the interaction between format and spoilers significantly affected plot comprehension. Overall, participants in our study found the plot of the video easier to comprehend than the plot of the short story. Spoilers themselves did not have a significant effect on overall plot comprehension. However, the presence of spoilers produced different outcomes for each of the format conditions. Participants who received a spoiler in the video condition rated their plot comprehension as significantly higher than those who saw the video without a spoiler—whereas spoilers had no effect on plot comprehension in the text condition. This outcome is different from previous studies that frequently demonstrated an increase in plot comprehension among participants who saw a spoiler (Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2018; Johnson et al., 2018; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013). Potential explanations for this finding include the possibility that the spoiler prompt was not powerful enough, or potentially that the short story was too complex for participants in this study.

We believe that it is difficult to generalize the findings of this study. Two of our results reflect consistent findings from other studies. For example, participants over-forecast the spoiler effect (Yan & Tsang, 2016). In the case of our study, participants' beliefs about spoilers did not reflect the findings. Our results are also consistent with studies that found that, regardless of the effect of spoilers on enjoyment, participants report that they try to avoid plot spoilers as much as possible (Maxwell, 2022). However, we believe that it is difficult to generalize the main effect of spoilers and format on enjoyment of narratives. Like some existing studies (e.g., Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2011; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013) we found that spoilers did not significantly negatively affect participants' enjoyment of narratives. However, our data are dissimilar to other recent findings (e.g., Johnson & Rosenbaum 2015; Levine et al., 2016; Yan & Tsang, 2016)—including the study that ours was most closely related to (Daniel & Katz, 2019). Compared to these existing studies—regardless of whether they corroborate our findings—our data lack significantly in one key area. Past studies had significantly larger samples, which helps to improve internal validity and account for variability. Given this significant difference in sample size, it is difficult to draw conclusions or generalizations about how spoilers affect participants' enjoyment of narratives or the interactions between spoilers and narrative format.

There are several limitations that limit the generalizability of our study. Firstly, we did not include a question asking participants if they had read or watched "To Build a Fire" before. This potentially introduces a confound if any participants had previous knowledge of the story. The methodology of having participants in a standard classroom complete the study on their phones may have allowed for distractions, like incoming calls or notifications. The classroom setting also meant that participants were likely able to see the screens of other people's devices, potentially allowing participants to guess the experimental manipulation. We also had to remove several participants from each session because they did not read the requirement to bring their headphones with them. Finally, we believe that using slider scale items for our survey was a mistake. Slider scales generally provide more freedom of choice and help to avoid participants feeling forced into an answer with which they did not agree. However, due to the small sample size, the slider scale items introduced a significant amount of variability, which made both data analysis and generalizing results difficult. According to the central limit theorem, studies require a sample size of roughly 30 participants per group to achieve normal distribution. With an average group size of 15.75, it is difficult to assume normal distribution within our study (Kwak & Kim, 2017). That said, Levene's test did not indicate a violation of normality in our current study ($p = .72$). Regardless, it is difficult to parse whether the high standard deviation for each group is representative of the population or if it is due to individual differences, outliers, selecting answers at random without reading the questions, etc. Collecting data from a larger sample would help to significantly alleviate such issues. Additionally, to mitigate the risks posed by participants randomly selecting answers, we recommend that future studies include attention check items (e.g., "For this item, please select answer 'D'") to identify such cases. However, if we

were to continue collecting data with the same sample, we would elect to use Likert scale items to help reduce measurement error, decrease within-group variability, and simplify data analysis. Nonetheless, although our current data may be underpowered, they provide interesting preliminary insights on spoilers and suggest directions for future research.

Despite the limitations of this study, it still contributes to the relatively small body of literature on the topic of spoilers. We were able to reaffirm some consistent findings of other studies. Participants dislike and attempt to actively avoid spoilers. Other studies have found that this avoidance may be due to fear of missing out (Maxwell, 2022). We also found that the interaction between spoilers and format significantly influenced participants' plot comprehension. Previous authors have mentioned that increased processing fluency from spoilers may allow participants to better understand the plot, which could mitigate the other negative effects of spoilers (Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2013). Another possible explanation is that plot engagement and transportation (feeling immersed within a narrative) play a significant role in moderating the spoiler effect, as perhaps participants' engagement with and excitement about a narrative predict the effect of spoilers on their enjoyment. Previous research found that spoilers did not decrease enjoyment of short stories but did decrease enjoyment of television shows (Daniel & Katz, 2019). If participants were not engaged with our selected narratives, it could potentially explain the outcome. Ultimately, this study serves as a blueprint for further replications and improvements to increase internal validity and generalizability, while also providing some additional insight and reaffirmations to previous findings.

We believe the next logical step for this study is to conduct similar replications while reducing confounds and other issues. Increasing sample size while maintaining internal validity would likely be the biggest factor in improving upon this study. It is important to find a video and short story that are closer to each other in terms of time to complete. We would also recommend choosing a shorter story overall to hopefully improve engagement. Future studies should also utilize existing multi-question measurements for enjoyment, rather than measuring it through a single question. For broader studies on spoilers, we recommend looking closely at the interactions between fear of missing out and the spoiler effect. We also believe that it is important to examine the interaction between engagement and the spoiler effect—which could potentially help to explain some of the variances in findings between studies on this topic. Ultimately, the best way forward is to continue researching the spoiler effect to add to the small research pool and improve our psychological understanding of this increasingly prevalent topic.

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Appendix

Story Survey Items

Q6.1 On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 means "not at all" and 100 means "absolutely":

	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
I felt transported into the story. ()	
The story was suspenseful. ()	
I found the story exciting. ()	
The plot was easy to follow. ()	
I liked the story. ()	

Page Break

Q6.2 On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 means "not at all" and 100 means "absolutely":

	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
I enjoyed the ${e://Field/format}. ()	

Page Break

Display This Question:

If spoiler = yes

Q6.3 On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 means "not at all" and 100 means "absolutely":

	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
I felt irritated after being exposed to the ending of the story. ()	

Page Break

Q6.4 On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 means "not at all" and 100 means "absolutely":

	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
I think that plot spoilers reduce my enjoyment of narratives. ()	
I do my best to avoid plot spoilers. ()	