

# Comprehending conflicting science-related texts: graphs as plausibility cues

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**Abstract** When reading conflicting science-related texts, readers may attend to cues which allow them to assess plausibility. One such plausibility cue is the use of graphs in the texts, which are regarded as typical of ‘hard science’. The goal of our study was to investigate the effects of the presence of graphs on the perceived plausibility and situation model strength for conflicting science-related texts, while including the influence of readers’ amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs as a potential moderator of these effects. In an experiment mimicking web-based informal learning, 77 university students read texts on controversial scientific issues which were presented with either graphs or tables. Perceived plausibility and situation model strength for each text were assessed immediately after reading; reader variables were assessed several weeks prior to the experiment proper. The results suggest that graphs can indeed serve as plausibility cues and thus boost situation model strength for texts which contain them. This effect was mediated by the perceived plausibility of the information in the texts with graphs. However, whether readers use graphs as plausibility cues in texts with conflicting information seems to depend also on their amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs.

**Keywords** Graphs · Multiple text comprehension · Plausibility · Science text comprehension

## Introduction

When people read about topics which are currently debated controversially in science and in the public—for example, the potential dangers of electromagnetic radiation—they are

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often confronted with texts communicating information whose epistemic status is in dispute and therefore unclear. Thus, building an adequate situation model—that is, a referential representation of the situation (or state of affairs) discussed in the texts (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983)—presents a particular challenge. In this process, both characteristics of the text as well as characteristics of the reader are likely to determine how the textual information is processed. In particular, the subjective plausibility of the information presented by those texts may play an important role (Lombardi and Sinatra 2012; Schroeder et al. 2008). However, readers are often unable to make in-depth judgments concerning the plausibility of the arguments presented in scientific controversies because they lack the relevant knowledge of the content domain. In large parts, this is due to the ever increasing complexity and dynamics of scientific knowledge which has expanded the division of cognitive labor between members of modern societies (Bromme et al. 2010; Keil et al. 2008; Porsch and Bromme 2010). As a consequence, it seems to be a rational strategy for non-experts in a field to consider not only the text content but also cues such as genre features when it comes to judging the plausibility of the information which is communicated in science-related texts. One such cue is whether or not a text contains graphs visualizing empirical data. Graphs are widely used in science, and their prevalence is strongly correlated with the ‘hardness’ attributed to scientific disciplines (e.g., Smith et al. 2000). For this reason, it seems likely that the presence of graphs is one of the genre features which readers may consider as a plausibility cue. However, only readers possessing some experience with scientific texts and graphs may be expected to use this cue in the comprehension of multiple texts on controversial scientific issues. In the present study, we tested these assumptions in an experiment with university students who read texts with and without graphs on two scientific controversies currently debated in public.

### The role of genre features in evaluating and comprehending multiple documents

A growing body of research has been concerned with how readers learn from multiple documents (e.g., Bråten et al. 2009; Britt et al. 1999; Perfetti et al. 1999; Rouet et al. 1997; Stadtler and Bromme 2007; Stadtler et al. 2011). When learning with multiple science-related texts with conflicting information, readers can increase their chance to achieve a coherent and adequate situational representation by weighing the information from multiple texts according to some criteria, leading to different strengths of the situation model for individual texts. One such criterion may be the content of the texts themselves: For example, if readers judge texts as less plausible because they contain argumentation errors they will also construct a weaker situation model for these texts (plausibility effect; Schroeder et al. 2008). However, non-experts are not always able to judge the plausibility of the text content because they lack the relevant knowledge. According to the notion of a cognitive division of labor (Keil et al. 2008), the knowledge accumulated in a society is not distributed evenly across all of its members but forms clusters within individuals who are then respected as experts in a specific subject area (Keil et al. 2008). In this way, the cognitive division of labor may be regarded as an instance of the more general division of labor which characterizes cultured societies. Just as the division of labor implies that many tasks can only be accomplished by skilled individuals after years of training, the division of cognitive labor implies that scientific knowledge can only be generated and evaluated competently by expert scientists. In contrast, non-experts must rely on expert opinions to a large extent to get an understanding of scientific controversies (Bromme et al. 2010). If this assumption holds, it becomes all the more important for non-expert readers to use information such as genre features to make up their mind whether they find science-related texts

plausible or not. Genre features belong to the broader category of source characteristics. In the literature on multiple text comprehension, the term *source* is often used more or less synonymously with the term *document*. According to Perfetti et al. (1999), the term bundles all characteristics of a document which pertain neither to its content nor to its rhetorical goals. Thus, source characteristics include information about the author(s) of a document such as their name(s), status, and motives, information about the context in which a document was created, information about its formal characteristics such as language and publication type, etc. In the domain of history where documents represent the most important type of evidence, experts (but not novices such as high-school students) routinely apply a sourcing heuristic which includes paying close attention to such source characteristics, which are utilized, among other things, to assess the documents' trustworthiness (Wineburg 1991). Training students in applying a sourcing heuristic can improve their document-based understanding of historical events as indicated by the quality of essays they wrote on the event (Britt and Aglinskas 2002). Thus, source evaluation seems to be crucial for building an adequate mental representation of historical events out of multiple documents.

Several studies suggest that considering source characteristics for an evaluation of documents may also be beneficial for comprehending multiple texts on scientific issues. For example, Bråten et al. (2011) found that undergraduate students differentiated between the trustworthiness of different documents on climate change (such as excerpts from textbooks and newspaper articles). Importantly, the students used source characteristics (e.g., author, publisher, or publication date) as well as the content of the texts to form their trustworthiness judgments. A correlational study by Bråten et al. (2009) with university students goes beyond these results by shedding light on the relationships of perceived trustworthiness and comprehension of multiple documents on climate change. In this study, trustworthiness ratings of the reliable document as well as considering document type as a criterion predicted comprehension over and above prior knowledge.

At first sight, the reliance on genre features in judging the plausibility of text information may appear to be a superficial and suboptimal strategy. Such a view seems to be suggested by two-process models of persuasion such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM, Petty and Cacioppo 1986) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM, Chen and Chaiken 1999). According to these models, persuasive messages are processed via a central route (or systematic processing strategy), directed at an evaluation of the message content and characterized by effortful, elaborative processes, and via a peripheral route (or heuristic processing strategy), directed at the peripheral, non-content cues (e.g., author expertise, likeability of the source) and characterized by quick and efficient decision rules. Both models assume that it depends on recipients' ability and motivation (for example, their intelligence and personal involvement) and on situational factors (such as time pressure) to what extent they will process the message via central route or peripheral route processes. The common reading of the two-process models is that the two routes of processing are independent from one another and that there is a trade-off between the persuasive impact of the two routes, implying that recipients rely less on an evaluation of the message content the more they use peripheral cues (cf. the trade-off hypothesis, Petty and Wegener 1998). However, whereas this assumption may be consistent with much of the literature on the ELM (but see Petty and Wegener 1999), it is at variance with the HSM and a number of empirical studies demonstrating interactions of central route and peripheral route processes (cf. Bohner et al. 1995; Reimer et al. 2005). Thus, the persuasion literature provides evidence that source characteristics such as genre features can be used alongside content for a thorough evaluation of messages.

Starting from this general idea, the present study focuses on the question how the presence of graphs in science-related texts affects perceived plausibility and comprehension of the information communicated by these texts. For the purpose of the present study, graphs may be defined as figures which contain at least one scale and convey quantitative information (Cleveland 1984). Technically, graphs differ from many of the source characteristics which have been investigated in previous studies (e.g., Bråten et al. 2009, 2011) because they are part of the document itself but not, for example, characteristics of the author, the publication outlet etc. Moreover, graphs are used to communicate quantitative information such as the results of empirical studies. However, it is important to note that more often than not, the information contained by graphs could as well be communicated by means of other representational devices, most notably in form of tables or by reporting data in the text itself (for examples from the domain of psychology, see the publication manual of the American Psychological Association 2005). In this sense, despite the fact that graphs communicate content, their presence in a science-related text may be regarded as a genre feature which characterizes scientific texts and, in turn, can be used by readers as a cue to the plausibility of the information communicated in the text. We will pursue this argument in more detail in the next section.

### Graphs visualizing empirical data as plausibility cues

When reading science-related documents about controversial issues, the presence of graphs may be an important cue for assessing a document's plausibility. According to Latour (1990), graphs that visualize empirical data are central to science and have strong persuasive power, because they allow displaying complex relations rather easily (Tufté 1983). As these graphs are widely used in the so-called 'hard sciences', they have become generally associated with scientificity. Accordingly, readers may perceive graphs as a kind of signal that a text contains plausible information (Latour 1990).

One of the first systematic investigations of the use of graphs in different scientific disciplines was done by Cleveland (1984). He analyzed 2,300 journal articles from 46 journals from the natural and the social sciences with respect to the relative space which graphs occupy in the journal articles (fractional graph area). The mean fractional graph area for natural science journals was .14 which is far larger than the mean fractional graph area of .03 in social science journals, with almost no overlap of the distribution of the journal means. Given that a main purpose of articles in natural science journals and social science journals alike is to present data, this difference in graph use is striking. Smith et al. (2000) undertook an extension of Cleveland's study by collecting 'hardness'-ratings from psychology students and scientists for the seven scientific disciplines from which journals in his study were taken. These ratings ranged from three (sociology) over six (psychology) to nine (physics) and showed an almost perfect linear relationship and a correlation of .97 with the mean fractional graph areas. In addition, Smith et al. (2000) asked the same respondents to rate the scientific 'hardness' of the subfields of 25 journals published by the American Psychological Association. Again, they found an almost perfect linear relationship and a correlation of .93 between the mean fractional graph areas and the 'hardness' attributed to the scientific disciplines (which ranged from behavioral neuroscience to educational psychology, see also Smith et al. 2002). Thus, there was a strong linear and positive relationship between perceived 'hardness' and the use of graphs both between different scientific disciplines and between different subfields of one single discipline (psychology). In contrast, the prevalence of the two other major devices to describe quantitative information or relationships, equations and tables, has been found to be either

uncorrelated with hardness (Arsenault et al. 2006), or even inversely related (Smith et al. 2002).

Why are graphs used so frequently to communicate scientific results? According to Smith et al. (2002), they have a number of advantages over other types of inscriptions. Most importantly, they are more readable than, for example, tables, and facilitate the recognition and comparison of patterns, because they combine automated perceptual processes with semantic cognitive processes (Kosslyn 1994; Tufte 1983). They convey a sense of ‘visual witnessing’, i.e., a vicarious experience of the state of affairs they represent. Graphs are assumed to influence mental model construction more directly due to their inherent structural properties (Schnotz 2005; Schnotz and Bannert 2003; Wainer 1997). Furthermore, the visual argument hypothesis posits that graphs have a computational advantage over linguistically communicated information (see Vekiri 2002, for an overview). For example, by coding properties and relations between elements in a spatial manner, graphs facilitate not only recognition but also information search and enable direct and easy perceptual inferences about abstract relationships such as relative magnitudes or trajectories (Larkin and Simon 1987).

These features can explain why graphs are employed so frequently to communicate empirical data in the natural sciences. This frequent use, in turn, provides a rationale for readers to use the presence of graphs in a document as a cue to its plausibility when they are confronted with multiple documents on controversial scientific issues whose validity they cannot evaluate based on content alone.

#### Reader characteristics in the comprehension of texts with graphs

Using graphs as plausibility cues may be a rational strategy, but not all readers are expected to apply this strategy. Rather, only readers who have acquired at least a basic familiarity with visualizations in science-related texts should be able to identify and use graphs as plausibility cues. In order to get an idea of the use of graphs in science-related texts and their distribution across texts associated with different degrees of ‘hardness’, readers must already have gained some experience with a number of science-related texts. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the association of graphs with plausibility is learnt and hence, the ability to use this association in reading science-related texts increases with readers’ experience. Studies which have investigated the use of source information in the comprehension of multiple documents in the domain of history provide some indirect support for this assumption. Several of these studies suggest that experts make extensive use of source characteristics whereas novices often fail to use source characteristics. Wineburg (1991), for example, found evidence for extensive use of source information in historians reading multiple documents from their field of expertise (i.e., they evaluated each source document before reading it, and compared information to their knowledge as well as to information from previously read texts before integrating it into their mental model) but not in high school students reading the same documents. Similarly, Britt and Aglinskas (2002) found that high-school and university students often do not pay attention to source information in learning with multiple texts until they are made aware of the fact that this information can be a valuable cue to evaluate the source. Rouet et al. (1997) asked students of psychology and students of history on a comparable level of academic training to read primary and secondary documents about a historical event. History students gave source information more weight in rating the usefulness of documents and based their statements in an essay on the event more strongly on primary sources than the psychology students.

Despite the fact that all of these studies refer to the domain of history and none of them considered the role of graphs, they suggest at least indirectly that readers' experience with scientific texts and conventions might play a role in the use of graphs as plausibility cues. In this study, we considered two indicators of this construct: domain knowledge concerning the topic of the text and knowledge about visualization conventions, i.e. general rules governing the design of graphs in scientific publications. Domain knowledge is one of the most important prerequisites and one of the most powerful predictors of comprehension. Among other things, domain knowledge is essential for interpreting incoming text information and creating a stable memory representation of the text content (Kintsch 1988), for bridging and elaborative inferences which help readers to achieve a coherent and rich representation of the text content (e.g., Best et al. 2005; Graesser and Bertus 1998), and for constructing a situation model (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). Knowledge about visualization conventions is a specific type of knowledge about rhetorical conventions. In text comprehension research, knowledge about rhetorical conventions has mostly been studied with regard to generic knowledge about conventional text structures (text or genre schemata and schematic superstructures) and linguistic devices signaling rhetorical relationships between text ideas (e.g., Lorch et al. 1993; Meyer 1975). This type of knowledge supports readers in extracting the main ideas of texts, drawing inferences, and integrating them with prior knowledge (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983, Chap. 7).

In the present research, we focus on a different possible role of domain knowledge and knowledge about visualization conventions: We investigate whether these reader characteristics make the use of graphs as plausibility cues more likely. Rouet et al. (1997) have proposed (for the domain of history) that generic knowledge about information sources (e.g., text types) and domain knowledge are likely to develop in close connection to each other during academic training, with the result that they form interrelated and overlapping dimensions of individual differences. In the present study, we adopted this proposal by assuming that domain knowledge and knowledge about visualization conventions are closely interrelated dimensions of individual differences which affect the use of graphs as plausibility cues in much the same way. For this reason, both variables were treated as indicators of a more general construct which may be termed *amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs*.

Another generic reader characteristic which should be of importance for the comprehension of multiple science texts with conflicting information is the individual working memory capacity for text. On a general level, working memory capacity may be regarded as the cognitive capacity which is needed for holding information active for further processing over relatively short periods of time but also for carrying out the cognitive processes operating on this information (Baddeley 1986). The overall capacity is limited and varies between individuals. In comprehending texts, readers are constantly required to actively maintain verbal information in order to connect it to new information which is encountered later. At the same time, they need to process this information. Thus, reading may be regarded as a dual (or rather, multiple) task which requires working memory (Daneman and Carpenter 1980). In particular, elaborative and other strategic cognitive activities which are particularly relevant for deep comprehension of text are likely to draw heavily on working memory capacity. In order to control for individual differences in this capacity, we included the Reading Span task developed by Daneman and Carpenter (1980) which includes a storage and a processing component (the latter partly overlapping with verbal fluency, Daneman 1991) and taps into the capacity of central executive functions in processing verbal material.

## Rationale of the present experiment

We investigated the effect of graphs on the processing of multiple texts with conflicting information by asking participants to study two texts taking opposite stances on a controversial science topic, while systematically varying the presence of graphs in the texts. The graphs conveyed only information that was already provided by the text itself. Furthermore, the information conveyed in the graphs was peripheral with regard to the scientific controversy. This ensured that any effect of the presence of graphs could be attributed to the graphs serving as a plausibility cue, rather than to the graphs facilitating comprehension or enhancing the argumentative power of the text in which they were embedded.

We presented the texts in a web-based environment mimicking an informal learning setting. The web-based environment was designed in a way that broadly resembled the design of an online science magazine with an entry page that provided titles and short “teaser” texts along with links to the two experimental texts. Each text was either presented with two graphs—which should induce an impression of scientificity, thereby increasing the perceived plausibility of the text for readers familiar with scientific conventions—or with two tables, which should not have this effect because of the nonexistent (or inverted) relationship between the use of tables and perceived scientificity (Arsenault et al. 2006; Smith et al. 2002). Two instances of graphs and tables were used in order to achieve a stronger manipulation. According to Arsenault et al. (2006) and Smith et al. (2002), the perceived scientificity of a publication depends on the amount of graphs in a text rather than the mere presence of graphs. In order to test the generalizability of the results, we used texts on two different controversies: the dangers of electromagnetic radiation and the potential of biomass as the ecological energy source of the future.

The strength of the situation model and plausibility ratings for information conveyed by the texts were assessed as dependent variables. As potential moderator variables of the effects of the presence of graphs on situation model strength and plausibility ratings, domain knowledge and knowledge of scientific visualization conventions were assessed several weeks prior to the experiment proper. Both types of knowledge were assumed to be aspects of one underlying and more general construct, i.e. the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs, and to exert the same effects. Accordingly, they were combined into one variable in the primary analyses. In order to back up this interpretation, additional analyses were conducted in which the two types of knowledge were entered as separate variables. Considering its relevance for integrating information within and across texts and other types of elaborative processing, working memory capacity (measured with the Reading Span task, Daneman and Carpenter 1980) was included as a control variable.

As discussed previously, the presence of graphs is strongly associated with perceptions of publications as instances of ‘hard science’ (Smith et al. 2002), which suggests that the presence of graphs makes the information contained in a text appear more plausible, even when the graphs do not provide any information over and above the text itself. However, not all readers should be able to use graphs as cues to the plausibility of a text. Rather, the use of graphs as plausibility cues presupposes a basic amount of experience with scientific texts, including the way graphs are used in these texts. Therefore, we expected the effect of graphs on the perceived plausibility of the information conveyed by the texts to be moderated by the amount of experience with science texts and graphs (Hypothesis 1). A positive effect of graphs on the perceived plausibility of text information should occur only in readers who possess a relatively high amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs, and it should increase with readers’ experience. Furthermore, we assumed—in line



with the plausibility effect (Schroeder et al. 2008)—, that readers who perceive the text with graphs as more plausible should also weight this text more strongly in situation model construction (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we expected the former effects to be mediated by the latter (Hypotheses 3; mediated moderation, Muller et al. 2005).

## Method

### Participants

Seventy-seven students (55 women and 22 men) from the University of Cologne (Germany) and the University of Applied Sciences in Olten (Switzerland) with an average age of 29.1 years ( $SD = 7.4$ ) participated in the study. Their domains of study were psychology (33.3 %), applied psychology (61.5 %), and other social sciences (5.1 %), all of which involve reading of scientific texts but have little overlap with the topics of the experimental texts used in this study. Most of the students (94.7 %) were at the bachelor level ( $\leq 6$  semesters), with none below the second semester (average number of semesters:  $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ). They received course credits for participation.

### Text and picture material

#### *Texts*

Four accessible texts about two currently debated and controversial scientific issues were used as experimental texts. Two of the texts discussed biomass as the ecological source of energy of the future whereas the other two texts discussed potential health risks of electromagnetic radiation emitted by cell phones. In a pilot study with 12 topics, an independent sample of 120 university students had rated these two topics as mildly interesting (biomass:  $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ; electromagnetic radiation:  $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ; ratings on a scale from 0 = not interesting at all to 4 = very interesting). They were selected because agreement to both sides of the controversy was nearly balanced. We asked participants in the pilot study to rate their agreement with two statements which represented the core arguments of either side of the controversy (e.g., Can bio fuels produced from plants [e.g., bio fuels made out of corn] secure our energy supplies in the future? Position A: Substituting fossil fuels by biomass can decrease carbon dioxide emissions. Therefore bio fuels made out of plants are more eco-friendly than fossil fuels. Position B: The mass production of biomass requires extending agriculture at the expense of rain forests. Therefore the ecobalance of bio fuels made out of plants is negative.) For the two selected topics, the mean agreement differences were the smallest of all 12 topics (biomass:  $M = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ; electromagnetic radiation:  $M = 0.38$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ; ratings were provided on a scale from 0 = do not agree to 4 = fully agree).

The texts were constructed on the basis of science-related journal articles from reputable German magazines which are accessible over the internet (e.g., *Spiegel Online*, <http://www.spiegel.de>; *Spektrum der Wissenschaft*, <http://www.spektrum.de>). In a first step, two texts taking the same stance in the controversy were constructed for each topic, resulting in eight texts in total with a length of approximately 1,200 words (range: 1,186–1,209 words). These eight texts were pilot-tested with an independent sample of 225 university students, each of whom judged two of the texts with regard to their difficulty, credibility, and the number, quality, and clarity of the arguments in each text. Based on these ratings, we chose a subset of four texts (two for each issue) that were comparable to



each other regarding all of the characteristics (ranges of characteristics measured with a 7 point scale, with 1 marking the low and 7 the high end of the scale: comprehensibility: 5.3–5.8, plausibility: 4.7–5.3, interestingness: 4.6–5.7, ease of identifying the text's position in the controversy: 4.6–5.3; range of perceived number of arguments measured with an open question: 5–6.1). The average readability score (determined with the German adaptation of the Flesch's Reading Ease Index, Amstad 1978) was 52.5 with a range from 50 to 55, indicating moderate difficulty. The two texts selected for each topic represented contrary positions in the controversy. Accordingly, one of the texts on biomass argued for the claim that biomass has the potential to be the ecological energy of the future (pro stance) whereas the other text claimed that biomass is not an ecologically beneficial substitute for mineral oil (contra stance). Likewise, one of the texts on electromagnetic radiation emitted by cell phones argued for the claim that cell phones cause health risks (pro stance) whereas the other text argued against this position (contra stance).

### *Graphs*

For each of the texts, two graphs (one line graph and one box plot) and two tables providing the same information as the graphs were constructed (see Appendix for an example). Both graphs and tables only contained information that was also given in the text itself. Moreover, the information that was provided in the graphs and tables was not essential for understanding the text and did not contribute to the strength of its arguments (for example, one graph displayed the percentage of people who reported that they could not live without their cell phones).

### *Dependent variables*

#### *Situation model strength*

Situation model strength was assessed with 24 test items (sentences) per text with a verification task (modified after Schmalhofer and Glavanov 1986). Participants' task was to judge for each test item whether it matched the state of affairs described in the text or not. Out of the 24 test items, eight were paraphrases of sentences from the text, eight were inferences not explicitly provided by the text but matching its contents, and eight were distracters that did not represent a sensible inference from the text but shared some superficial content aspects. Paraphrase items were constructed by changing the word order of a sentence included in the text and replacing content words with synonyms. In this way, the similarity of the sentence to the text surface was reduced but the explicit content of the sentence was kept intact. In contrast, inference items represented information that participants had to infer to build an adequate situation model of the text content.

The measure for situation model strength was based on the proportions of yes-responses to inference items and yes-responses to distracter items in the verification task. First, these proportions were probit-transformed to normalize their distributions. The probit transformation is based on the assumption that the proportion reflects the cumulative proportion of a normally distributed variable. The proportion is probit-transformed by determining the corresponding  $z$ -value to which 5 is added to avoid negative values (e.g., Cohen et al. 2003, p. 241). Afterwards, the probit-transformed proportions of yes-responses to the distracter items were subtracted from the probit-transformed proportions of yes-responses to the inference items (similar to computing the signal detection measure  $d'$ , see Schmalhofer and Glavanov 1986 for details).

### *Plausibility*

For each of the paraphrase items used in the verification task, participants also indicated (in a separate block of responses) whether they found the statement expressed in the item plausible (“yes”) or not (“no”). They were instructed to consider in their judgment whether they hold the view that the statement is (likely to be) true or not. They were also told that there were no correct or incorrect answers but that they were asked to express their personal opinion. For each text, we calculated the proportion of paraphrases that participants found plausible as an indicator of perceived plausibility.

### *Assessment of reader characteristics*

#### *Amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs*

A measure of the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs was based on two knowledge tests, prior (domain) knowledge and knowledge about visualization conventions. Prior knowledge of the two issues was assessed with multiple choice questions (one correct answer, two distracters, and the possibility to indicate nescience). The two scales reached internal consistencies (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) of .64 for the biomass issue (16 items) and .64 for the electromagnetic radiation issue (18 items) (internal consistencies for each topic estimated for the subsamples of participants who later received experimental texts on the topic). The mean item difficulties were .26 (biomass) and .28 (electromagnetic radiation) in the present sample, indicating an overall low level of prior domain knowledge. Participants’ knowledge about visualization conventions in scientific texts was measured with a multiple choice test (one correct answer, two distracters, and the possibility to indicate nescience). The test comprised questions concerning characteristics of scientific texts, the use of graphics in scientific texts in general, as well as the use of boxplots and line graphs in particular [e.g., What can be read off the ordinate in a line graph? (a) The values of the dependent variable, (b) the deviation of measured values from expected values, (c) the extreme values, (d) I don’t know]. The test consisted of 21 items and reached an internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) of .61 in the present sample. Based on the assumption that prior domain knowledge and knowledge about visualization conventions represent two partly overlapping but complementary facets of general scientific literacy skills, these two variables were combined into one measure of the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs by computing and averaging the  $z$ -scores of the two variables.

#### *Working memory capacity*

Participants’ working memory capacity was measured with a computer-based version of the Reading Span (Oberauer et al. 2000). The Reading Span task is a complex span task that requires participants to memorize information while performing other mental operations. Participants judge the validity of true (e.g., Every bike has two wheels) and false (e.g., The sun fits into a closet) sentences which are presented in cycles of three up to seven sentences. At the end of each cycle, they are asked to write down the final words of all sentences presented in that cycle. The mean proportion of end-of-sentence words which were remembered in the correct order was taken as an indicator of participants’ working memory capacity. In terms of Baddeley’s (1986) working memory model, the Reading Span task draws on the capacity of the central executive and the phonological loop, both of which are central to text comprehension and reading.

## Procedure

The assessment of the reader characteristics at both universities as well as the experiment proper in Cologne took place in group sessions with up to six participants in lab rooms or computer rooms of the participating universities. In Olten, for practical reasons, the experiment proper was conducted in a classroom with all 48 participants simultaneously. The experiment was supervised and it was made sure that participants worked individually. Participants read either the two texts on biomass or the two texts on electromagnetic radiation in a self-paced fashion. The texts were presented browser-based in form of an online web-site that mimicked typical informal learning settings. The layout of the webpage was simple and held constant over all experimental conditions. Thus, it provided no hints concerning the trustworthiness of the webpage. On the entry page, participants were provided with the text headlines and could choose which text they wanted to read first. When they had finished reading one text, participants performed the verification task on the test items for this text. The verification task was followed by a recognition task for the same set of items (results are not reported here). Finally, participants provided plausibility judgments for the test items. In all tasks participants gave their responses by selecting one of two radio buttons labeled 'yes' and 'no'. The test items were presented in a different fixed random order in each task. After reading one text and responding to the test items, participants repeated the same steps for the second text. The reason why comprehension and plausibility assessments were administered right after each text rather than at the end of the reading phase was that text position effects (such as a memory advantage for the second text) should be excluded. At the end of the experiment, participants were thanked and debriefed. Relevant reader characteristics were assessed on a separate occasion 4 weeks prior to the experiment proper in order to minimize carry-over effects.

## Design

The core experimental design was a one factorial (presence of graphs: graphs vs. tables) within-subjects design. In addition, the topic of the texts (biomass vs. electromagnetic radiation) was controlled for as a between-subjects factor. The combination of the presence of graphs with text stance (pro vs. contra), the order in which links to the texts were presented on the entry page of the experiment (for all participants, this order was identical to the order in which the texts were read), and the order of subsequent assessments were counterbalanced across participants by means of eight experiment versions per topic. Participants' working memory capacity and their amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs served as covariates.

## Results

Our hypotheses on the role of graphs as plausibility cues in the comprehension of conflicting science-related texts were tested by three sets of interrelated analyses. First, we tested whether the perceived plausibility of information from texts with graphs compared to texts with tables increased with participants' amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs (Hypothesis 1). For these analyses, we used a variant of ANCOVA that allows modeling interactions of covariates and within-subjects factors (Judd et al. 2001).

Second, we used the same type of model to test whether participants who perceived the text with graphs as more plausible also built a stronger situation model for this text (plausibility effect; Hypothesis 2). In these analyses, the differences of perceived plausibility between the

text with graphs and the text with tables were included as covariate. Amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs was included as additional covariate.

In a third set of analyses, we addressed the question of whether the hypothesized interactions of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs on the one hand with the presence of graphs on the other hand would exert indirect effects on situation model strength through perceived plausibility. Technically, Hypotheses 1 and 2 imply a mediated moderation model because the interaction effects of amount of experience and the presence of graphs in the text on situation model strength are assumed to be mediated by perceived plausibility (Muller et al. 2005). Interactions of a metric covariate and a within-subjects treatment with two levels are equivalent to main effects of the covariate with the differences between the two treatment levels as dependent variables (Judd et al. 2001, p. 119). Accordingly, the mediated moderation relationships implied by our hypotheses can be addressed by estimating and testing the indirect effects that amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs (Hypothesis 3) exerts on the differences in situation model strength (dependent variable) through the differences in perceived plausibility (mediating variable) between the text with graphs and the text with tables.

For estimating the standard errors of the indirect effects and testing them for significance, we used the bootstrapping technique proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Bootstrapping is superior to alternative techniques for testing indirect effects (such as the Sobel test or the stepwise procedure proposed by Baron and Kenny 1986) because it does not rely on the assumption that the sampling distribution of the indirect effect is normal. The assumption of normality is often unrealistic, particularly in small samples. The bootstrapping technique usually yields greater power than the alternative techniques while keeping type-I error low (Hayes 2009; Preacher and Hayes 2008; Shrout and Bolger 2002).

In all analyses, the text topic, the assignment of texts to the conditions with graphs or with tables, the order in which texts were read, and participants' working memory capacity were included as control variables. Categorical predictors (text topic, assignment of texts to experimental conditions, reading order of the texts) were contrast-coded ( $-1$  vs.  $1$ ) and continuous predictors (amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs, working memory capacity, differences in perceived plausibility) were  $z$ -standardized prior to entering them into the model. All hypothesis tests were based on a type-I-error probability of .05. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and correlations of the theoretically relevant variables and major control variables.

### Effects of graphs on perceived plausibility

Hypothesis 1 predicted that a text with graphs would be perceived as more plausible by participants with relatively strong experience with scientific texts and graphs but not by participants with relatively weak experience. An ANCOVA for within-subject designs with the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs as covariate and the proportion of paraphrases of text sentences judged as plausible as dependent variable yielded an interaction of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs and the presence of graphs,  $F(1, 70) = 6.5, p < .05, \eta^2 = .09$ . For interpreting the interaction, we estimated the simple slopes of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs for the plausibility judgments concerning the text with graphs and the text with tables (Fig. 1). In addition, we estimated and compared the perceived plausibility of the text with graphs and the text with tables for participants with a relatively high amount of experience (one standard deviation above the sample mean) and participants with a relatively low amount of experience (one standard deviation below the mean). Please note that these comparisons do not reflect estimates for

**Table 1** Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of text topic, covariates, and dependent variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2a	2b	2c	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Text topic (contrast-coded, -1 = biomass vs. 1 = radiation)	-.06	1.00										
2a Domain knowledge (biomass) <sup>a</sup>	.35	.17	.03									
2b Domain knowledge (radiation) <sup>a</sup>	.26	.13	.13	.52*								
2c Domain knowledge (combined) <sup>b</sup>	0.02	1.05	.10	.73*	.83*							
3 Knowledge of visualization conventions <sup>a</sup>	.69	.14	.03	.17	.18	.26*						
4 Experience with texts and graphs (2c and 3 combined) <sup>c</sup>	0.00	0.80	.08	.57*	.63*	.79*	.79*					
5 Working memory	.65	.14	.08	-.10	-.04	-.05	.26*	.14				
6 Perceived plausibility (text with graphs)	0.73	0.20	.12	.04	.05	.20	.22	.26	.16			
7 Perceived plausibility (text with tables)	0.75	0.19	.19	-.18	-.14	-.04	-.09	-.08	-.02	.34*		
8 Situation model strength (text with graphs)	1.95	0.83	.03	-.24*	.07	.03	.16	.12	.34*	.19	.08	
9 Situation model strength (text with tables)	1.92	0.83	.06	.15	.21	.28*	.27*	.34*	.34*	.02	.15	.36*

Note. *N* = 77

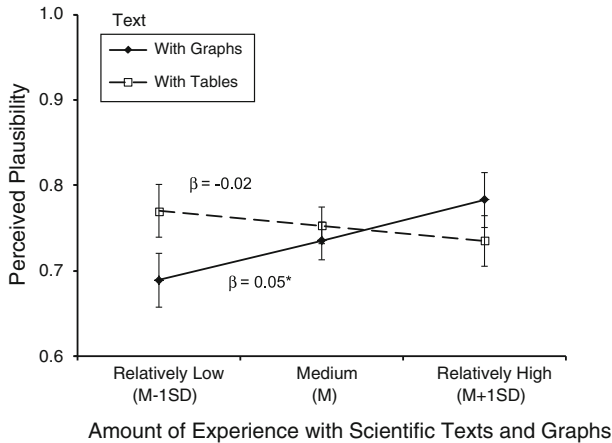
\* *p* < .05

<sup>a</sup> Proportion of correct responses

<sup>b</sup> Knowledge scores for each topic were *z*-standardized (within the two groups receiving either the biomass or the radiation topic) and then combined into one variable (participants' value depended on the topic they received)

<sup>c</sup> Arithmetic mean of *z*-standardized knowledge scores (domain knowledge and knowledge of visualization conventions)

groups of participants but exemplary point estimates of the differences between the text with graphs and the text with tables at specific values of the covariate. In line with Hypothesis 1, the perceived plausibility of the text with graphs increased with participants' amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs ( $B = 0.05, SE_B = 0.02, p = .05$ , one-tailed,  $\Delta R^2 = .05$ ) whereas the slope of this variable was not significant in the text with tables ( $B = -0.02, SE_B = 0.02, p = .17$ , one-tailed). Participants with a relatively high amount of experience perceived the text with graphs as more plausible ( $M = .78, SE_M = 0.03$ ) than the text with tables ( $M = .74, SE_M = 0.03$ ) although this difference was not significant at one standard deviation above the sample mean,  $t(69) = 1.4, p = .09$  (one-tailed). In contrast, participants with a relatively low amount of experience perceived the text with tables as more



**Fig. 1** Perceived plausibility of texts with graphs and with tables as a function of participants' amount of experience with scientific text and graphs. The *graph* shows simple regression lines; *error bars* represent the standard error of the mean for selected point estimates on the regression line (\* $p < .05$ )

plausible ( $M = .77$ ,  $SE_M = 0.03$ ) than the text with graphs ( $M = .69$ ,  $SE_M = 0.03$ ),  $t(69) = -2.25$ ,  $p < .05$  (one-tailed). In sum, the interaction largely matched the pattern predicted by Hypothesis 1 except for the finding that the plausibility disadvantage for the text with graphs at a relatively low level of experience was more pronounced than the plausibility advantage at a relatively high level of experience. Apart from the interaction effect predicted by Hypothesis 1, no other effects were significant.

In supplementary analyses, we explored whether the predicted interaction of the presence of graphs with the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs would also be obtained with each of the two component variables, domain knowledge and knowledge about visualization conventions. In a model with domain knowledge as covariate the interaction of this variable marginally failed to reach significance,  $F(1, 70) = 3.9$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . In the model with knowledge about visualization conventions as covariate the corresponding interaction was slightly stronger and significant,  $F(1, 70) = 4.2$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . In a model including both covariates their interactions with the presence of graphs were no longer significant.

In sum, the ANCOVA results for perceived plausibility as dependent variable largely corroborated Hypothesis 1. The higher participants' amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs, the more they were inclined to perceive the information provided by the text with graphs as more plausible than the information provided by the text with tables. Interestingly, the pattern of the interaction was such that participants with less experience did not perceive both texts as equally plausible but found the text with tables more plausible than the one with graphs. In other words, whereas graphs served as plausibility cues for participants with a relatively high amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs, the absence of graphs (or the presence of tables that replaced them) seemed to play a similar role for participants with a relatively low amount of experience. However, it must be noted that this part of the interaction was not predicted and can be interpreted in several ways. We will return to this issue in the Discussion.

In the supplementary analyses, domain knowledge and knowledge about visualization conventions tended to exert parallel and overlapping effects on the use of graphs as

plausibility cues, each of which are weaker than the effect of the combined variable. Taken together, this pattern of results supports the idea that as far as the use of graphs as plausibility cues is concerned, domain knowledge and knowledge about visualization conventions may be regarded as aspects of one underlying construct.

### Effects of graphs on situation model strength

According to Hypothesis 2, participants perceiving the text with graphs as more plausible should also weight this text more strongly in situation model construction compared to the text with tables (plausibility effect, Schroeder et al. 2008). An ANCOVA with the differences in perceived plausibility (plausibility of the text with graphs minus plausibility of the text with tables, with a symmetrical distribution around a mean not significantly different from zero,  $t(77) = -0.79$ ,  $p = .43$ ) and amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs as covariates and situation model strength as dependent variable revealed an interaction of the differences in perceived plausibility with the presence of graphs,  $F(1, 69) = 4.2$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . The pattern underlying the interaction was consistent with Hypothesis 2 (Fig. 2a). The differences in perceived plausibility did not have an effect on the situation model for the text with graphs ( $B = 0.00$ ,  $SE_B = 0.10$ ,  $p = .50$ , one-tailed) but exerted a negative effect on the situation model for the text with tables ( $B = -0.22$ ,  $SE_B = 0.09$ ,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed,  $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ). Participants who perceived the text with graphs as the more plausible one (point estimate at a plausibility difference of one standard deviation above the mean) also showed a stronger situation model for this text ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SE_M = 0.13$ ) than for the text with tables ( $M = 1.70$ ,  $SE_M = 0.12$ ),  $t(69) = 1.7$ ,  $p < .05$  (one-tailed). In contrast, in participants who perceived the text with graphs as the less plausible one (point estimate at a plausibility difference of one standard deviation below the mean), situation models for the text with graphs and the text with tables did not differ in strength,  $t(69) = -1.3$ ,  $p = .10$  (one-tailed).

In addition to the effect of perceived plausibility, we found a strong positive main effect of working memory capacity,  $F(1, 69) = 14.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .17$ . Moreover, there was a positive overall effect of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs on situation model strength,  $F(1, 69) = 6.4$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ . However, this effect was qualified by an ordinal interaction of amount of experience and the presence of graphs,  $F(1, 69) = 4.2$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . Simple slopes analyses revealed a pattern of effects of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs that ran counter that of perceived plausibility (Fig. 2b). Whereas the effect of amount of experience on the situation model for the text with graphs was positive but not significant ( $B = 0.08$ ,  $SE_B = 0.10$ ,  $p = .20$ , one-tailed), there was a strong positive effect on the situation model for the text with tables ( $B = 0.31$ ,  $SE_B = 0.10$ ,  $p < .01$ , one-tailed,  $\Delta R^2 = .12$ ).

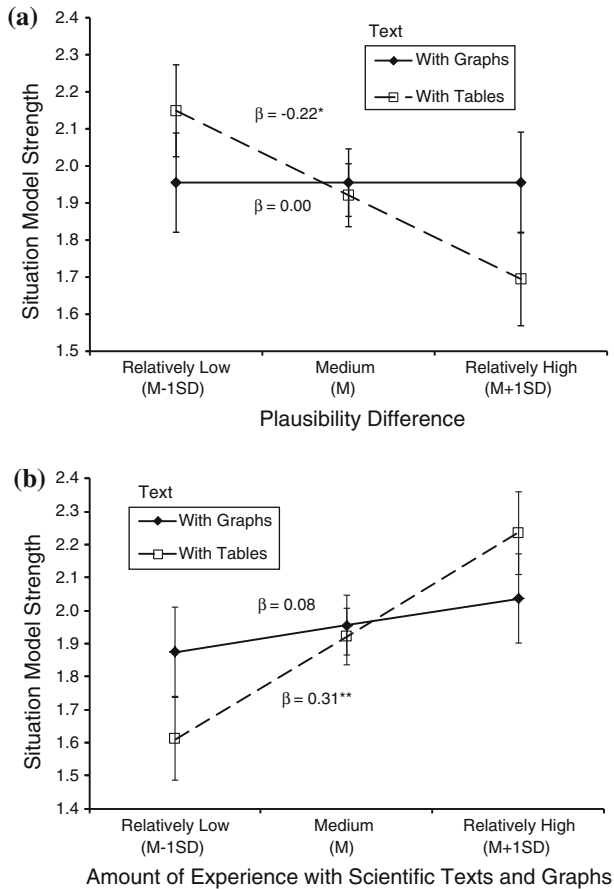
Taken together, the data exhibited the plausibility effect in favor of the situation model for the text with graphs as predicted by Hypothesis 2. Interestingly, we also found a positive effect of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs but only for the text with tables. One possible interpretation of this effect, which runs counter the plausibility effect, is that a sufficient amount of experience with scientific texts prompted participants to elaborate on the content of the text they found less plausible. We will follow this issue up in more detail in the “Discussion” section.

### Indirect effects on situation model strength through perceived plausibility

The final set of analyses aimed at linking the results reported in the previous two sections to each other by establishing mediation effects. Combining Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2,

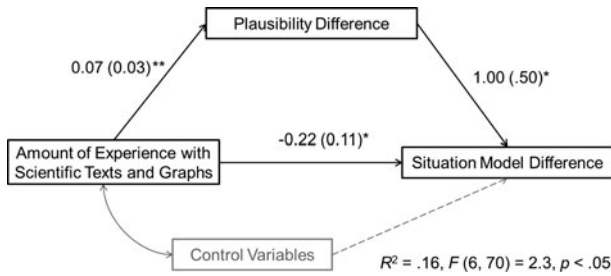


**Fig. 2** Situation model strength for texts with graphs and with tables as a function of **a** differences in perceived plausibility (text with graphs minus text with tables) and **b** participants' amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs. The *graphs* show simple regression lines; *error bars* represent the standard error of the mean for selected point estimates on the regression line (\* $p < .05$ )



Hypothesis 3 predicted an indirect effect of the interaction of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs on the one hand and the presence of graphs on the other hand on situation model strength through perceived plausibility. In particular, the stronger participants' amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs, (a) the more they should be inclined to perceive the text with graphs as more plausible than the text with tables (mediator), and (b) the more they perceive the text with graph as more plausible than the text with tables, in turn, the stronger the situation model for the text with graphs should be relative to the situation model for the text with tables (dependent variable). Together, these two paths should form an indirect effect of the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs on the differences of the two texts in situation model strength (text with graphs minus text with tables) via their differences in perceived plausibility.

Figure 3 provides the path coefficients for the mediator model implied by Hypothesis 3. Consistent with this hypothesis and with the previous analyses, the coefficients of the path from amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs to the differences in perceived plausibility and of the path from the differences in perceived plausibility to the differences in situation model strength were positive and significantly different from zero. The estimate of the indirect effect from amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs via differences in perceived plausibility to the differences in situation model strength was 0.066, with the 90 % confidence interval ranging from 0.013 to 0.167 (bias-corrected



**Fig. 3** Mediator model depicting the indirect effect of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs on differences in situation model strength (text with graphs minus text with tables) via differences in perceived plausibility (path coefficients with standard error; \* $p < .05$ )

estimates, 5000 bootstrap samples; cf. Preacher and Hayes 2008). The fact that the 90 % confidence interval does not include zero implies that the indirect effect of amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs on the differences in situation model strength via the differences in perceived plausibility was significant at a type-I error probability of .05 (one-tailed). Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

The mediator model revealed additional findings of interest (Fig. 3). On top of its positive indirect effect via the differences in perceived plausibility, amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs exerted a negative direct effect on the differences in situation model strength. Thus, the negative direct effect of experience on the situation model difference canceled out its positive indirect effect. As noted already for the ANCOVA results for situation model strength, this pattern of effects might be explained by assuming that amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs is involved in different and sometimes antagonistic processing routes. On the one hand, it increases the likelihood that graphs are perceived as plausibility cues, yielding an advantage for the text with graphs. On the other hand, amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs might also be the basis for other types of elaborative processing which might have counteracted the effects of perceived plausibility on situation model strength. We will return to this issue in the Discussion.

### Discussion

In order to test the hypothesis that graphs can serve as plausibility cues und thus influence the processing of science-related texts on a controversial topic, we asked participants to read two texts taking opposite stances on a controversial scientific issue while varying the presence of graphs in the texts. As dependent variables, we measured situation model strength for each text after reading, as well as plausibility ratings for information contained in the texts. As reader variables, amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs (comprising the two aspects domain knowledge and knowledge of scientific visualization conventions) and working memory capacity were assessed several weeks prior to the experiment proper and included in the analysis as covariates.

In line with our predictions, we found an interaction of the presence of graphs and the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs on perceived plausibility. This interaction was due to the fact that amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs had a significant effect only on the processing of the text with graphs: The higher the amount of experience, the higher the

perceived plausibility of the text with graphs. As a result, readers with a relatively higher amount of experience tended to perceive the text with graphs as more plausible than the text with tables. This supports the general assumption that graphs can enhance the perceived plausibility of the information they accompany when readers possess experience with scientific texts and graphs. The finding supports the notion that readers with a relatively higher amount of experience are aware of the association of graphs with scientificity (e.g., Smith et al. 2000). It is also in line with the suggestion by Rinck (2008) that readers with more experience in reading graphs may rely more heavily on graphical information when reading scientific texts. However, it must be noted that we also found that readers with a relatively low amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs tended to perceive the text with graphs as less plausible than the text with tables. This part of the interaction of the presence of graphs with readers' amount of experience with scientific texts and graphics was not predicted and thus is open for interpretation. It seems possible, for example, that the graphs (in particular the somewhat less common boxplots), which did not really provide information over and above the text itself, introduced extraneous cognitive load in participants with a relatively low amount of experience, which might have led to a lower proportion of plausibility judgments by decreasing processing fluency (for the fluency-plausibility link, see, for example, Brown and Nix 1996).

The more participants perceived the text with graphs as more plausible than the text with tables, the weaker was their situation model for the text with tables. Thus, the data exhibited a plausibility effect (Schroeder et al. 2008), which means that information which is perceived as plausible was weighed more strongly in situation model construction, and that less plausible information was more likely to be rejected. However, the plausibility effect, which puts the text with tables at a disadvantage, was cancelled out by a reverse direct effect of the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs: The higher the amount of experience, the stronger the situation model for the text with tables.

Using path analysis, we were able to connect these two sets of findings in one single mediation model. In particular, we found support for the idea that the use of graphs as a plausibility cue by participants with a relatively high amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs and, in turn, the effects of perceived plausibility on situation model strength form a mediational pathway. Through this pathway, amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs benefits comprehension of the text with graphs by increasing its relative plausibility. However, there was also a direct effect of the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs on situation model strength which ran counter the mediational effect of the amount of experience through plausibility. This effect attenuated the situation model difference between the text with graphs and the text with tables. Accordingly, amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs seems to work in two different and complementary ways: On the one hand, readers with more experience with scientific texts and graphs are more likely to perceive the text with graphs as more plausible and, as a consequence, weight the information from this text more strongly in situation model construction. On the other hand, their relatively higher amount of experience enables them to build a stronger situation model for the text with tables. As a result, readers with a relatively high amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs are able to construct a strong situation model for both the text with graphs and the text with tables but different mechanisms are likely to be in effect in the two types of texts. Whereas for text with graphs, perceived plausibility seems to play a mediating role, the present data provide no hints at the mechanism which accounts for the better situation model for text with tables. However, the text comprehension literature provides ample evidence and suggests several ways in which domain knowledge as well as rhetoric knowledge can benefit situation model construction (for example, general construction and integration mechanisms, Kintsch 1988, or bridging and elaborative inferences, Best et al. 2005; Graesser and Bertus 1998). Given that

readers with a relatively higher amount of experience found the information in the text with tables less plausible, it seems possible that they elaborated more on the information provided in this text in order to make an informed decision about its plausibility (Richter 2011).

The present study raises a number of further questions regarding the mechanisms and the scope of the effects of graphs found in this study. First of all, the present experiment did not differentiate between different types of graphs and, hence, does not contribute to a clarification which properties of graphs cause readers to use them as plausibility cues. The visual argument hypothesis (Vekiri 2002) and similar approaches (e.g., Schnotz 2005) suggest that the crucial factor might be the computational advantage of graphs and their related feature of making complex (and often abstract and invisible) states of affairs visible and easily understandable. If this view is correct, using graphs with an increased computational load should decrease their effectiveness as plausibility cues. A second possibility, which coheres well with the visual argument hypothesis and the results of the present experiment, is that the use of graphs as plausibility cues depends on some kind of statistical learning, which puts the amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs in the foreground. According to this possibility, graphs would gradually acquire their power to serve as plausibility cues when a reader learns to associate the presence of graphs with the perceived 'hardness' of scientific studies. In order to test this hypothesis directly, measures of the actual amount of reading scientific texts combined with a longitudinal study design would be desirable. Another implication of the assumption that the use of graphs as plausibility cues is learnt and develops with academic training is that graphs containing errors or graphs which are not designed in accordance with conventional design principles do not convey a sense of plausibility (quite to the contrary, they should cause a sense of implausibility).

A related question which is raised by the present study and would be worthwhile to pursue in future research is whether the power of graphs to serve as plausibility cues is tied exclusively to their appearance in scientific texts. In addition to scientific publications in the natural sciences, graphs are frequently used in popular science texts and even in mass media publications (often with errors, Tufte 1983). If graphs unfold a persuasive power in these publications, this power is likely to be borrowed at least in part from the use of graphs in scientific texts. Thus, experience with popular science publications alone should not enable readers to use graphs as plausibility cues in learning with conflicting scientific texts.

It must be noted that the present experiment suffers from certain limitations which should be overcome in future research. One limitation concerns the fact that comprehension (situation model strength) was assessed for the individual texts only. We did not assess how the presence of graphs impacts the integration of information across texts with conflicting information, which is a major issue in research on multiple documents comprehension (e.g., Bråten et al. 2009, 2011; Perfetti et al. 1999). The present results suggest that readers with a relatively high amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs give information from texts with graphs more weight in situation model construction than information from texts with tables. We would assume that a similar pattern occurs in the integration of information across texts: For example, readers with a relatively high amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs should favor information from texts with graphs when actively comparing arguments from texts with conflicting information. A second limitation concerns the way plausibility was measured. The approach taken in this experiment was to assess plausibility judgments towards information actually taken from the experimental texts. Whereas this approach has the advantages of being less abstract and of focusing the plausibility ratings on the text contents, it might also be associated with certain problems. One problem is the surface similarity to the verification task used to assess situation model strength. This similarity might have created a method-induced dependency between the two tasks which might partly

account for the plausibility effect. At any rate, it would be desirable to include more general ratings of plausibility or trustworthiness directed at texts as a whole in follow-up research. This would link the research on graphs as plausibility cues more strongly to existing studies on multiple (science) text comprehension where rating or ranking tasks directed at texts as a whole are quite common (e.g., Bråten et al. 2009, 2011). Another potential limitation is that the overall level of prior domain knowledge was quite low, which caused a lower variance and, as a consequence, a relatively low internal consistency of the prior knowledge measures. The restricted variance and reliability of the prior knowledge measures might have contributed to the overall surprisingly low correlations of the prior knowledge measures with comprehension (situation model strength). A broader range of prior knowledge would also help to examine the relationship of prior knowledge with knowledge about visualization conventions more closely. Finally, the fact that no measures of cognitive processes were collected renders any conclusions concerning the mechanisms underlying the use of graphs as plausibility cues preliminary. In future studies, we plan to use on-line measures such as reading times and eye-tracking measures which should allow some insights in the allocation of cognitive resources between the different texts as well as between texts and graphs during reading. One question of particular interest is whether the use of graphs as plausibility cues may under some conditions go along with a more superficial processing of the text information (as predicted by a strict dual-route view, Petty and Cacioppo 1986) or whether it generally increases cognitive resources allocated to the text content, resulting in deeper processing. In order to clarify the possibility that not only the presence of graphs but also the presence of tables might prompt particular cognitive processes, these experiments should include another control condition which features neither graphs nor tables.

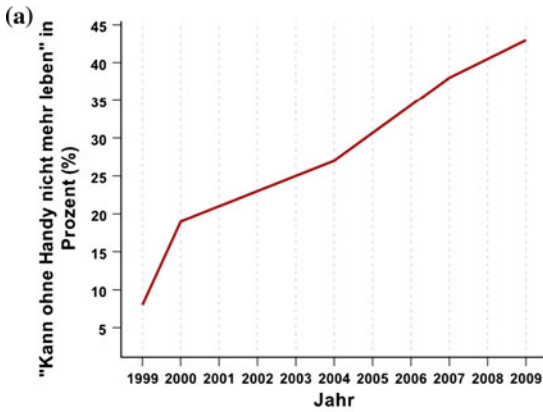
To sum up, the present study suggests that lack of graphs (or presence of tables) induces more critical and elaborative processing in readers with a relatively high amount of experience with scientific texts and graphs. However, readers with a relatively high amount of experience also seem to use the presence of graphs as a plausibility cue, which weakens their situation model for texts with tables. Given the strong correlation of graph use and the perceived ‘hardness’ of scientific publications, the use of graphs as plausibility cues might be a rational strategy for non-experts who are often unable to judge the plausibility of science-related information based on the content of information alone (cf. the division of cognitive labor, Keil et al. 2008). Instructional interventions directed at fostering learning with multiple texts on controversial science topics should strengthen students’ knowledge about scientific visualization conventions and make them aware of the possibility to use graphs as one of several plausibility cues for weighting information in knowledge construction.

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## Appendix

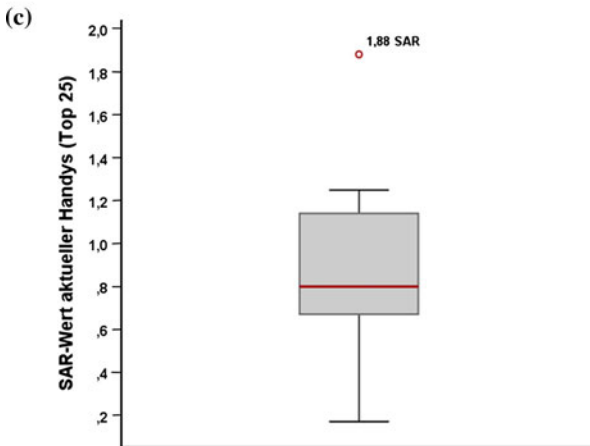
Graphs and tables used as experimental stimuli

See Fig. 4.



(b)

Jahr	%
1999	8
2000	19
2004	27
2007	38
2009	43



(d) **Tabelle 2**  
Verteilung der SAR Werte aktueller Handy-Modelle (Top 25)

	Perzentile			Ausreißer
	25	50	75	Sony
<b>SAR</b>	0,65	0,80	1,15	1,88

Anmerkung. SAR = Spezifische Absorptionsrate elektromagnetischer Felder in biologischem Gewebe.

**Fig. 4** Examples of the *graphs* and *tables* (in German) used as stimuli in the experiment: a *line graph* (a) and a *boxplot* (c) with corresponding tables (b, d, respectively) representing information from the texts on electromagnetic radiation

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