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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Probe: What is a Lecture?

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I recently was invited to make a presentation to the media ecology class of Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson) and received an email from one of the students thanking me for “a great lecture.” I thanked her writing “thank you, glad you enjoyed the lecture which was actually not a lecture but a presentation.” I then indicated to the student that my presentation was not a lecture because I did not read anything but made an oral presentation looking at my notes from time to time to make sure I covered all the topics I wanted to cover.

This led me to wonder about definition of the word lecture and its etymology. The definition I found in the Oxford dictionary was as follows: “an educational talk to an audience, especially to students in a university or college.”

The etymology of lecture which I found suggested that lecture has the root of reading in it. “From late Middle English (in the sense ‘reading, a text to read’): from Old French, or from medieval Latin *lectura*, from Latin *lect-* ‘read, chosen’, from the

verb *legere* (https://www.google.com/search?q=etymology+of+lecture&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALiCzsYJYNDvL_IOA8rZYrGXkjfYSdaa-Q%3A1664466427088&ei=-701Y8P-BLCgptQPjoqtWAQ&oq=etymology+&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2I6EAEYADIECCMQJzIECAAQzILCAAQsQMgEgkQlyCggAELEDEIMBEEMyBQgAEJECMgUIABCRAjIKCAAQsQMgEgkQzIECAAQzIKCAAQgAQQhwIQFDIFCAAQgAQ6CggjEK4CELADECc6EQguEIAEELEDEIMBEMcBENEDOhAILhCxAXCDARDHARDRAxBDOgcIABCxAXBDSgQIQRgBSgQIRhgAUPMKWP8sYNo6aAFwAHgAgAGHAYgBwAiSAQMzLjeYAQCgAQHIAQHAAQE&scIent=gws-wiz, accessed Sept 29, 2022).”

Before the invention of the printing press when books were in short supply the professors in the university would slowly read a book in his possession to his/her class and the students would copy what the professor read (1st reading). The professor would then read the book a second time at a faster pace so students could make sure their copy of the professor’s text from the first reading was accurate

(2nd reading). Then there was a third reading to actually discuss the text. In Canada all bills passed by Parliament go through three readings.

The 21st century university is much the same as the medieval university despite the existence of printed books. One big difference, however, is that all today's university courses have a text book or a reading list and sometimes both associated with the course that the student is taking. Many professors give lectures by reading a text and students make notes as in first readings of the medieval universities. Their notes are not literally what the professor delivered in their lecture as they have easy access to books. After the lecture there are often tutorials to discuss the ideas as in the Medieval third reading. The only changes are the loss of the second reading and the fact that many professors do not actually read a text they prepared but rather speak contemporaneously often from prepared notes to make sure they cover all the topics on the agenda for that day's lecture. But there are still those professors that still read a prepared text.