

# Tips for writing and delivering your lectio praecursoria

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## The purpose of the lectio praecursoria

A skilfully written, prepared, and delivered lectio sets the tone for the public examination/defence, and the interaction between you and your opponent. After the opening lines by the custos, your *lectio praecursoria*, the opening lecture, is the prominent task in the beginning of the event.

The lectio praecursoria is directed at a heterogenous audience that has come to watch the defence in the lecture hall and/or online. The lectio is an opportunity to introduce your research topic and to give the audience members tools to follow and enjoy the academic and in-depth conversation during the examination. Finally, the lectio gives you a chance to place yourself among the experts in your field of research.

### A great lectio

- provides background on the phenomenon studied in the dissertation,
- introduces the audience the key concepts that will be used during the defence,
- makes visible the research problem which you aimed to answer or even solve with your research.
- For many doctoral candidates, the lectio is also an effective and appropriate time to address the main results and conclusions of the research, and
- to mention the potential impact, contributions, and beneficiaries of the research.

Note: The traditions may vary in different fields so do consult the professors and experienced staff at your doctoral programme on what your lectio should and should not include.

## The length of the lectio praecursoria and the manner of delivery

The lectio should last no more than 20 minutes. Always plan and time your lectio to be under 20 minutes, 18 minutes being a safe and suitable length. Remember that there is a difference in

- reading your lectio to yourself,
- reading your lectio out loud by yourself, and
- delivering your lectio to the audience with a sense of interaction.

The latter takes more time as your goal is not to recite what you prepared but rather, provide new information to the listener for them to understand. Thus, when practising and timing your lectio, ask for a rehearsal audience (a mock examination), or actively

imagine delivering it to an audience while making eye contact with them.

The length is approximately 7–8 pages. One minute read aloud and delivered to an audience in English is approximately 160 words of text (1000 characters including spaces). Hence, under 3000 words (18,000 characters including spaces) is an 18-minute lectio. Note! The word count varies between individuals and topics since some specifics may benefit from slower pace.

Traditionally in the lecture hall, you deliver the lectio standing. If you have a condition that restricts you from standing up during your lectio, you most certainly can deliver the opening lecture sitting down.

During an online defence and depending on the technology (channel and camera positioning), it may be most practical to sit in front of the camera.

After the lectio, you remain standing to listen to the opening words of the opponent.

## Opening and closing words of the lectio praecursoria

The lectio begins with the following words, during which the doctoral candidate should look towards each party addressed:

- *Honored Custos, Honored Opponent, dear audience members, or*
- *Honored Custos, Honored Opponent, Honored audience members.*

Avoid gender specific terminology such as “Ladies and gentlemen” –there is no need for such categorization. Same with gender pronouns. Instead of saying he or she, use ‘they’ unless it is significant to your research to make a distinction.

Once the lectio has come to an end, the doctoral candidate addresses the opponent and asks them to present their critical comments regarding the dissertation. You can say, for example:

- *I ask you, honoured Professor NN (Doctor NN, or the title that has been agreed), as the opponent appointed by the Faculty of XX, to present the observations you consider appropriate for this dissertation, or*
- *I now call upon you, Professor / Dr. NN as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of XX to present your critical comments on my dissertation.*

If you have two opponents, you naturally address them both.

Ask your opponent(s) beforehand how they would like to be referred as. For example, some academics prefer ‘professor’, some prefer Dr. or even some other form of address. It is important for the sake of the formal event to use polite terms.

The opponent will now stand. You also remain standing. If the defence is online, you may both be sitting down. If the opponent is online, and you are in a lecture hall,

remain standing after your lectio.

## The content of an excellent lectio praecursoria

An excellent lectio will consider what the audience knows and what they do not know, as many of the people attending your examination have not necessarily read your dissertation. Therefore, the purpose of your introductory lecture is to communicate

- why the research was important to conduct (background and research problem), and
- what new insights it gives us on the phenomenon you studied and at large (benefits and impact).

Remember that the purpose of the public defence is to discuss the choices you made in detail, e.g., on your research methodology and the results. This means that you should leave out the finest details of your study from the lectio as they will be covered in the academic conversation to follow.

## The structure of your lectio

### A possible structure in a nutshell

The words I use here are to guide your goal, i.e., what you aim to achieve with your words and paragraphs. The skeleton model provided below, is not intended to be used as direct quotes but rather, as a set of ideas of what you should aim to tell the listener at each point of the lectio. You see the purpose of each part in parenthesis.

1. *In all our daily lives, we know the phenomenon from A.*  
(Connect with and motivate the listener, use a relatable and practical everyday example, help them identify with the topic, and draw from their existing knowledge to build on going further)
2. *We know from research that ...*  
(Give background with pedagogic intent: make sure the listener becomes familiar with all the relevant terms and concepts that will be used during the public defence as well)
3. *What we don't know is ...*  
(Build the void, have the listener come to the same question as you did –it adds to their motivation to listen and pick their brains)
4. *I wanted to know ... In my dissertation, I ask ...*  
(Communicate clearly what you aimed to discover. You can return to it later as well –repetition with new and complex information is emphatic towards the listener and ensures comprehension)
5. *The data was collected with/in and we approached it with both ... and ... X number of people participated / We ran X number of tests.*  
(The focus of the lectio should be on the big picture. Thus, provide the scale without small or complex details)

6. *First, we needed to know if... The results showed that ... It left me wondering whether...*  
(If you wrote a compilation dissertation, i.e., articles, try not to mechanically recite each as separate entities but rather, create a story of discovery. Same with a monograph dissertation)
  
7. *Therefore, I approached the second study with... / we formulated new hypothesis: we expected to find Y.... To our surprise, no Y was found. What it means is that Y is ... but not ...*  
(This is a great opportunity to add the researcher into the research. Let the audience see and hear what you experienced –communicate your emotions like excitement, bewilderment, interest, etc. with adjectives that guides the listener’s interpretation, adds interest and immediacy)
  
8. *Previous research has stated that ... In my study, the X was not the case. Rather, .... Thus, what we need to consider in the future is not only H but also G.*  
(Engage in dialogue with the background and findings that you referenced in the beginning. It places your dissertation into the context of the academic literature and community. Claim your findings)
  
9. *The findings of my dissertation will be of use to ... and ...*  
(Name groups, a theory, organizations, etc. that you perceive will benefit from your research and invites them to use the dissertation. End with an optimistic, empowering, call-to-action or hopeful message, no matter the research topic).

## The beginning of your lectio

One way to start thinking about your lectio is to remind yourself of the reasons that made you begin your doctoral studies. What was your motivation? Perhaps you chose a hot topic at the time, or you discovered that there was something missing from the research literature. Maybe you wondered why no one had studied the topic before. “What is the missing link between these phenomena or known facts?” “What would happen if someone were to combine the two approaches?”

You can also start with what moved you or called you for action, what provoked your thoughts or what you found puzzling. Remember to elaborate on the why. Note: Your goal here should be sparking the interest of the listener rather than self-disclosure. In other words, don’t recite your CV or journey to how you got to where you are but rather, take the listener along to the journey of discovery. Keep the issue, the topic, at centre stage.

It may be that you began writing your doctoral dissertation because a professor suggested an interesting topic, or you were accepted into a research group. These are also valid reasons. In the latter case, you should focus on the scientifically justifiable questions that you can now answer with your research. Alternatively, you can refer to relevant news and societal conversations at the time or now or start with a short anecdote or quote to form the basis for your lectio.

The better your audience can understand the content, the terms and concepts, goals,

significance, and role of the study as part of your field and science, the better equipped they will also be to follow the examination conversation that follows your lectio.

## The ending of your lectio

End your lecture with something impactful and elevated. The last few paragraphs carry a lot of weight also because the listener tends to remember best what was said last.

A common and highly effective and eloquent ending is to return to the beginning. For example, if you started your lectio with a quote from Stephen Hawking, revisit and elaborate on the quote with what we now know more of its meaning at the end of the lectio. It eloquently closes the rhetorical circle. No matter how you started, tie your lectio together and articulate how the beginning, (the middle) and the end connect. In addition, summarising and repetition are effective rhetorical device, particularly with new and complex information.

It is not the custom to thank people and institutions that supported you during your research, nor should you apologise for things like minor typing errors in the dissertation.

You end your dissertation with a full stop. In public speaking, a nonverbal full stop is to deliver the last word of the last sentence by looking at the audience and then, holding a meaningful pause. Make a clear separation between your lectio and the next communication task that follows. The pause is a stylistic closure and honouring of the preparation for and interaction with the audience.

## Visualizing your lectio

A lectio praecursoria is not the same as a scientific conference presentation. You do not necessarily need to use visual technology such as Power Point. There are differences between fields of study, and you should adapt my tips to suit the traditions of your own field. However, I do invite you to weigh your decisions based on the criteria of effectiveness and appropriateness from the perspective of the listener, not on the bases of 'this is how it has always been done'.

Visualization can be done verbally, nonverbally and with technological aids. Verbal visualisations are stories, examples, analogies, pieces of qualitative data, quotes, etc. Nonverbal visualisations are gestures, facial expressions, smile, elements of voice such as pauses, stresses, volume, pace, pitch, etc. When you use Power Point slides, the most important question to guide your planning should be: Does it support the listener in understanding my message or does it compete with my verbal message?

Human brains cannot multitask –we can only focus our attention onto one thing at a time. Instead of multitasking, we task switch, which is cognitively tiresome. You want the listener's focus to be on you rather than on reading a slide, a complex graph, a table, or too many pictures of the same subject.

Avoid excessive amount of text on the slides. A title is often enough plus a visual that supports the content. A well-chosen picture that brings immediate, supporting imagery to what you are saying allows the listener's focus to remain on you and your verbal message. An image or a graph accompanying and illustrating a point that you are

trying to make can be of great help when the topic is complicated. It is effective also when the audience members need to learn the relationships between various concepts and parts. If you visualise progress or hierarchy on a slide, walk the listener through the graph verbally.

Reflect on the number of slides that you initially draft. Are all the slides necessary for the listener or are the slides a safety blanket that we have gotten used to? Trust the fact that your lectio's content is interesting, you are interesting, and you possess all the knowledge. The listener wants to hear about your research from you and is less interested in a slide show.

## How to deliver your lectio to the audience?

When you deliver the lectio to the listener, make use of the vast resource that is your nonverbal communication. In other words, you should focus not only on what you say, but on how you say it. Step into the listener's shoes: What are the most effective and meaningful ways to talk about your research topic?

Effective nonverbal means of communication:

- Emphasise and illustrate your message with gestures and facial expressions. Facial expressions are particularly important in an audio-visual medium / online,
- Include meaningful pauses when you make an argument that you want to move the listeners or to evoke emotion and thought, e.g., when you address common beliefs or misconceptions about a topic,
- Slow down your speech when it involves numbers, such as percentages or years,
- Smiling connects and relaxes both you and the listener. Smiling creates immediacy both face-to-face and online,
- Make eye contact and sustain it with the whole audience. Online you can simulate eye contact by looking into the camera. It creates a sense of interaction between you and the listener. Eye contact also helps you to pace your speech in a conversational manner, which in turn, makes it easier for the listener to comprehend. It is useful to you too, since seeing your friends and family smile and nod in the audience, gives you positive feedback and support.

## Prepare your note cards

Write your lectio word-for-word. The opening lecture is more formal than a taught lecture. Lectio is also not a conference presentation per se. It is more like a speech. You are acknowledging and celebrating the hard work you've done, honouring research, and science at large.

Print your notes one-sided. Make them into memory cards of half A4 size. It is easier to hold the notes when the cards are smaller (but with large font) and they look tidier in your hands. If you compile the cards so that each new card contains a new topic or paragraph, you can create a natural rhythm for your speech with pauses. Practice with the note cards.

Remember to number your cards. This will make it easy to rearrange them and

continue talking if you should happen to drop the cards. You can also add notes onto your notes, such as colouring and underlining to remember to stress a word, anticipate a word difficult to pronounce so you will focus more on it.

You can take your note cards to the auditorium before the examination begins to make sure that they will be ready when you need them (and not, e.g., on the desk in the preparation room). Even better, have back-up notes on paper and on an iPad. The goal is to have 0% of your energy go into worrying and 100% going into engaging with the audience.

## Practising your lectio

The best piece of advice I can give is to prepare well. Individuals differ in how much and what kind of preparation they find useful. Nevertheless, everyone benefits from practicing out loud.

When practicing out loud, practise targeting your message to the listener. The best way to do this is to rehearse with an audience –peers, friends, family. Request their feedback. Does the structure of your introductory lecture work for them, spark their interest and motivate them to hear more? Did you maintain sufficient eye contact? What did they think about the examples you provided? Did you utilise varying tones of voice to help your listeners absorb the information?

When you practise aloud, time your lectio. Remember that during the actual event we may speed up the tempo as we become more alert and excited. The same applies to reading from your notes when you are rehearsing. But when you have an audience and you can see that they are listening to you, the tempo of your speech may change and slow down.

A great way to write, edit and learn your lectio is to tape record it and listen to it back. When you listen to a draft version, you can polish the lectio based on your own feedback. You do not need to, and I don't recommend that you even try to, memorise your lectio. Yet, having listened to it while taking walks or lying on the sofa, you become familiar with the content. In the actual event, you can then focus on the listeners rather than on your notes. In other words, you are able to lift your gaze from the text time to time to create a sense of interaction.

Another fantastic way to edit and practice is to video record yourself delivering your lectio. Particularly if you plan to have slides, take the role of the listener. Evaluate critically if all the slides and details on them are necessary for the listener especially if you also explain the same content.

The most important thing is for you to choose a set of preparation methods that feel right for you. Try to avoid over preparing. Over preparation means that you lose the motivation to deliver your speech to the listener in the actual event, since the content is so familiar to you that you have become uninterested in it. Luckily, the acknowledgment of the listener, the active eye contact or imagining of the audience will help you to overcome the rare pitfall.

For more guidance on communication tasks related to your doctoral defence, watch

the Youtube videos:

In Finnish:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRCkumtqTKzIJRh089DtMKB5RnxP6y0Gg>

In English:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRCkumtqTKzI5BCJurUhnH3x2gS2x7Zje>

Enjoy your accomplishment and showcasing your expertise,  
congratulations!