

The Origin of Silent Reading

The Origin of Silent Reading  
Video Documentary

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Text Technologies: The Changing Spaces of Reading and Writing

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Introduction:

This project was a great personal challenge. I found the concept of creating a documentary very daunting. I felt that I had so little experience with the video medium, that the idea of creating a ten-minute video, on a topic for which I could initially find very little material seemed impossible.

To get the project started in a realm of comfort, I first researched and wrote the script. When I was comfortable with its outline and much of the content I started working on the video. iMovie seemed daunting to learn in a short turnaround time. I had some familiarity with VideoScribe, but 10 minutes seemed far too long and had too much content for my abilities with the program. I was beginning to get frustrated and wondered why I couldn't use my favourite presentation program, PowerPoint. Then I was pointed toward Camtasia and all the pieces fell into place. I have created an animated PowerPoint presentation that I hope is mildly amusing at times and brings some entertainment value to the academic work. Working with Camtasia was much easier than I thought, and I am happy with the final project.

I hope you enjoy it.

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Script:Slide 1

SSSSShhhhhhh! This is a silent reading area. Have you ever thought of how silent reading became prevalent in our society? We all do it. When reading cereal boxes, novels, websites or almost any other text, the default reading mode for most of us is silence. But has it always been this way? Let's take a look at the history of silent reading and see if we can discover its origin.

Before exploring the concept of reading, silent or otherwise, we should first look at the origins of writing.

Slide 2

Ong (2002) challenges his readers to imagine a time before writing. A time when what you knew was "what you can recall". When faced with a challenging farming situation, or engineering conundrum, there were no textbooks to which you could refer. Perhaps you had an elder or expert to whom you could pose questions. Perhaps you could only rely on your own wits and trial and error to change outcomes and solve problems. Your knowledge base could grow based on these lived experiences. The world within your grasp was the most important and only concern. (click) From farming to childbirth, societal laws to the workings of the universe, all knowledge was passed from generation to generation and kept alive, with whatever modifications the orator saw fit to include. Ong (2002) refers to these cultures as homeostatic. That is to say that the society kept within its oral traditions that which was considered relevant to the times and omitted that which was no longer relevant.

As societies grew, one can imagine that the hazard of oral traditions is that they become diluted or lost. In societies where the holder of the historical data was lost to sudden illness or

injury, so too was the knowledge of their people. (click) Through this loss, or the threat of it, and the need for continuity and the comfort it brings to a civilization, the act of recording one's knowledge was necessitated. As such, even from a modern-day standpoint, students of history can see the evolution of recorded thoughts as an act of self-preservation.

### Slide 3

Early recordings, generally pictorial and carved into stone, painted on a rock face, or eventually scribed on papyrus were stylized and reliant on the interpretation of the viewer being in line with that of the creator. The 'reader' had to interpret each symbol in the way it was intended by the 'writer'. This could only accurately be accomplished if the original artist explained their work to you. It could then be assumed that the oral tradition of 'reading' the pictographs or hieroglyphs to someone was as important to the survival of their message as the act of recording the message itself.

(click) These sturdy, immovable forms of text were eventually replaced by more easily transported modes. Papyrus could be written, scrolled and to transport a message to a far-off dignitary. (click) Even moving to the age of the Gutenberg press, the ability to transport the ideas and written word, passing knowledge to those far and near made its importance a cornerstone of growing societies.

### Slide 4:

Over time, the written word became accessible to all levels of society. Yet, what of reading? Oral cultures, that we consider to be primitive, relied on their elders and statesmen to be the keepers of the communal knowledge. The keeping of knowledge using the printed word would be no different. Scholars, clergy and the upper class, those not tasked with working dawn

to dusk in the fields or later factories had the luxury of study. It was they who had learned to read who were able to pass the contents of the written word to the masses.

Slide 5:

In the beginning, texts were written in a form called scriptura continua, wherein the letters were not separated into words and the lines flowed together, somewhat like the hashtags of today.

Saenger (1997) posits that the scholars who were content to read the scriptura continua aloud had no desire to implement the separation of words into the written texts. This would, in their mind, serve only to make it easier for the underclasses to read and access texts. There was no benefit to this. In fact, the idea of reading and interpretation of scripture by the underclasses was threatening. What would happen if their ideas and interpretations of the gospel were misaligned with the teachings of the church? Surely this would create anarchy?

Slide 6:

Even when, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the King James bible was translated into English, the religious and secular scholars were concerned with the concept of 'ordinary' people reading the bible. It is said, that widespread reading of the bible did not come into play until the Elizabethan age (OpenLearn, 2018).

With the advent of reading to those in the mass of society, and the availability of written material, reading became a less ostentatious activity. It was something that could be undertaken by families, around a fire, where the young could read to the old, or vice-versa. Often, readers were self-taught, having gleaned tidbits of the reading conventions from others in passing. The ability to read became a point of pride.

Slide 7:

Reading was still very much aligned with oration. One could read to others, as a form of socialization. Yet, in antiquity, was silent reading a rare skill? Various scholars, including Saegner and Marshall McLuhan have published books and written papers containing this idea and popular culture has embraced their teachings as being as true as the gospel. The reading of text would be difficult in the days of scriptura continua and the act of reading aloud would have eased the task greatly. (click) Much of the text being read would have been transcribed from oral traditions and as such be meant to be read aloud. It would be incomprehensible to imagine that the lower classes would have had the ability to read within their minds, not having the benefit of sound to clarify meanings. Nietzsche bemoaned the habit of silent reading as being 'sloppy'. Without the inflections and changes in tone and tempo, writing would lose its meaning. (The Guardian). Therefore, in terms of silent reading, there must have been a magical turning point, somewhere around the 12<sup>th</sup> century or the arrival of the printing press that enabled the act of silent reading.

Slide 8:

Yet, in the 1960's, doubters of this theory emerged. They pointed out that there are passages in Cicero's writing which refer to deaf readers. Would they have had the ability to read aloud? Looking at Beowulf, there is an example of a character 'reading' runic characters and subsequently making a speech about his readings (Gummere, 2009). There is no mention that his initial readings were aloud. (Sternberg, 2015). In fact, (click) from Euripides to (click) Alexander the great, (click) Cicero to (click) Claudius Ptolemy, (click) Isadore of Seville and Nicholas de Lyra, there are many references to silent reading that predate not only the advent of modern type and mass literacy, and certainly to the days of scriptura continua.

Slide 9:

If such examples exist, predating the introduction of modern type, could it be that the origin of silent reading could better be aligned with the origin of reading itself. That there is no time in history at which one form existed without the other? This is certainly the idea of professor Daniel Donoghue.

In her 2015 interview with professor Donoghue, Zara Sternberg asked the professor whether he had any scientific support for his idea that silent reading had not evolved, but that it had always existed. His response was as follows.....and I'll ask you to read it silently, in your head

Slide 10:

**Donoghue:** If you are ever reading out loud, there is a time lag – your reading is about 2 words behind the uttering of the word, and as long as there is a time lag, you have a moment of silent reading. Do you hear a little voice in your head when you read silently?

**Sternberg:** Yes.

**Donoghue:** Most people do. They also often move their lips as well, especially when trying to absorb difficult material. Awareness is heightened when you begin to move your lips. Silent reading has been going on since reading has been going on. But now I want to flip it around completely, and say that silent reading has never been happening, because that little voice is still there. I wonder, now, if when [you are] reading aloud, if that silent voice is happening and being echoed in your louder voice.

Did you hear a voice in your head as you read those words? In which case, was the reading truly silent? At what point do the voices in our head take over for the sounds our ears would hear and make the act of silent reading as enjoyable as reading aloud?

Slide 11:

That certainly throws the idea of silent reading on its head, but the most important idea is the silent reading did not evolve, it has simply always been. It is the voice in your head that process the words before you say them.

James Fenton (2006) points out that, in order to read well aloud, one must have the ability to read ahead simultaneously. (click) Whether reading silently for pleasure, (click) reading silently with the intent to read aloud, (click) reading silently and reading aloud go hand in hand, as you cannot have one without the other.

Slide 12:

Why would silent reading be important? How would the act of reading silently benefit or change a society?

(click) Certainly, with the advent of libraries and public houses, the ability to read to one's self would mean less chaos. Imaging the cacophony of all the scholars in a room reading different texts.

(click) What of secret messages, clandestine affairs or political coupes? None would be possible without the ability to scan and interpret (which is all reading is in its essence) a private message. You cannot overthrow the King if you read the message of the upcoming insurrection aloud in the throne room!



(click) The idea of silent reading and its threat to the upper classes also lies in its secrets.

If a man is reading silently, the content of his reading material and its alignment with the political views of the day cannot be verified without seizing the text. All manner of blasphemous ideas could be spread. What if there was a text that said the sun did not revolve around the earth, but that it was the other way around. If the underclasses do not conform with the ideas and ideals of those with superior intellect (aka money and power), how would society thrive?

Slide 13:

All frivolity aside, the ability to read silently has also had an impact on the style of writing. If text was not to be performed, perhaps the levels of prose and poetry could be reduced. It was incumbent on authors to make their messages clear, as they would not have the advantage of a performer to interpret their intonations or intentions. Writing could be simplified. Messages more straightforward.

(click) With the migration of the idea of a text being performed to being read silently by the reader, detail could be provided to build the scene in someone's imagination. Detail regarding the physical realm in the text could be created in the mind of the reader, rather than created by set designers.

(click) As the printed word became accessible, that is to say that the majority of the members of a society became literate, messages and communication could become more personal in nature. Personal letter writing had certainly become much more of an art form, especially prior to our modern-day technologies.

(click) Silent reading has become so intertwined with our culture that we have built it into our education system. Periods of 'Sustained Silent Reading' or SSR are built into the timetables of many classrooms, allowing students to read for pleasure as well as to gather information.

Slide 14:

Young children love to be read to. The act of reading aloud is a performance that brings joy and imagination to their world before they have the skills to do it themselves. Books-on-tape, or audio books to use the present-day terminology, are an enjoyable form of entertainment for children and adults alike. But there is nothing like the act of curling up with a book and reading silently, keeping the characters to yourself like a treasure, imagining oneself in a far-off land and escaping from the confines of real life.

Whether silent reading is an evolution or simply the act of reading in the mind that occurs naturally before narration, is less important than the idea that reading and writing, the consuming of text and ideas is transformational to one's self and to society. An art that should never die.

Slide 15:

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