If you want to know about something that happened in the past – whether in a criminal trial or just among your family and friends – you almost always prefer to learn what an eyewitness saw or heard. And so most of us unreflectively think an eyewitness report is highly reliable. But is that the case?

Eyewitness testimony has been studied by legal experts and psychologists since the early twentieth century. The first important case study occurred in 1902. In a law school in Berlin, a well-known criminologist named von Liszt was delivering a lecture when an argument broke out. One student stood up and shouted that he wanted to show how the topic was related to Christian ethics. Another got up and yelled that he would not put up with that. The first one replied he had been insulted. A fight ensued and a gun was drawn. Prof. Liszt tried to separate the two when the gun went off.

The rest of the students were aghast. But ...

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