

# Latin in Less Than Two Hours

## A Brief Lesson in Using and Translating Latin

Latin really is a simple language, really! This manual is designed to provide the necessary information to those involved in SLI (the Swetnam Language Initiative) so that they can complete their assignments (which requires the use of Latin as a base language). It is highly recommended that you purchase a *Cassell's Latin-English Dictionary*. Of course, it is hoped that many people, and not just those involved in SLI, will benefit from this manual.

When learning Latin, there are really only a few things to know when you are going to be using a Dictionary, Pen, and Paper to do your translating. The most important are: **Syntax, Roots, Endings, Tenses, Cases.**

### Syntax

One of the first things that you should keep in mind, when you are composing your Latin texts, is that the syntax of the Latin language is different than those of English, but not so different that they present a problem. The most basic Latin sentence must consist of a Verb, that's it. *Verbs in Latin also contain information about the Subject of the verb*, and thus, you don't really need an express subject. For example,

*Amo* → *I (am) love(ing).*

Here you can see that the verb “Amo” consists of all the parts necessary to make a complete English sentence. *Expressed subjects (which are not 3<sup>rd</sup> person identities which must be named, such as “that building”, but rather are implied, such as I, You, She) are only used if the writer wishes to emphasis that subject.*

Beyond the basic sentence structure of a Verb, **each Latin sentence is developed starting with the Subject and its parts**, such as adjectives, **then the Object(s) of the Sentence and its parts, followed by the Verb and its parts.** In general, any modifiers you would put on a noun generally come after the noun, while most adverbs which are applied to a verb are put right before the verb at the end of the sentence.

It should be noted that word order is very flexible in Latin compared to English, if not as flexible as in some languages. The key to understanding which words go with what is **Agreement of Adjectives.** That is *every modifier of a noun or verb must have the same gender/number/etc of that word.* For example,

*Puerī patrem videō* → *I see the boy's father.*

If you look up in a dictionary you will see that “boy” and “father” have the same gender by their endings (more on endings later).

Another thing that should be noted is that you don't always have to have a Verb in the sentence. Sometimes, that verb is implied in what are called *Predicate Nouns or Adjectives.* That is, a noun together with a modifier actually implies association in the positive between the two. For example,

*Vir novus.* → *The man is inexperienced.*

If there were other such words in the sentence, that might be translated as “newbie” instead.

## Roots and Endings

The key to any Latin word is understanding the *stem* and the *ending*. When you take a significant word in Latin and want to use it in a sentence, you need to figure out how it should be used in the sentence, and then choose the correct ending to represent your meaning. **Many/most of the prepositional or helping words in English are implied by the endings of a word in Latin.**

When you find a word in the dictionary, you will be given the *key pieces* of that word so that you know which *declension* (for nouns) or *conjugation* (for verbs) that word belongs to. **Adjectives take the gender, number, and case of the words they are modifying.** The same concept holds true for adverbs. For nouns, in a dictionary, you will be given the *nominative* and the *genitive* ending for that word, which will tell you what declension, as well as what gender that word is. For verbs, you will receive the *present tense* and the *infinitive* of the word.

To apply a new ending to a word, you should be aware of what the stem is, which you can obtain from the dictionary by the endings it gives you, and by referencing those to the endings in the front of your dictionary. The new ending of a word is added to the stem to form a word which is useful in a sentence. For example,

*Video, -re* → *To see, is seeing* (Dictionary entry)  
*Video* → *I see.*  
*Videre* → *To see.*  
*Vides* → *You (sing.) see.*  
*Videt* → *He (she/it) sees.*  
*Videmus* → *We see.*  
*Etc.*

You can see here that this is a 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation verb. The subject of the verb, as well as the number of the verb is specified by its ending. It should be noted that any of these could have been translated as “am seeing” or “are seeing,” as the *present tense* (more on that) actually means an action which is or is continuing to happen.

## Verb Tenses

There is actually a great deal more specified in a Latin Verb conjugation than just tense. There is the Voice, Mood, Tense, Person, and Number.

There are two Voices: Active and Passive, which are essentially the same as in English. Except for the situation (which occurs often) where the passive is reflexive, meaning that the subject and the object of the sentence are one and the same. This is very similar to the Greek Middle tense.

There are four Moods: Indicative, Subjunctive, Imperative, and Infinitive. The first three are noted as *Finite Moods* while the infinitive is not.

There are six Tenses: The first three are continued action tenses, **Present, Imperfect, and Future**. The last three are completed action, **Perfect, Pluperfect, and Future Perfect**.

It should be noted that only the *Indicative Mood* has all six tenses. The Subjunctive has no future or future perfect, and the Imperative has only the present and the future. The Infinitive has the present, perfect, and future.

The Persons are as in English: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Number represents either Plural or Singular.

You should also read up on what Verbs can do as Gerunds, that is, used as nouns. It is out of the scope of this manual to teach that.

The *Subjunctive Mood* has many idiomatic uses, as in commands, conditions, and various dependent clauses. It is often translated by the English Indicative; frequently by means of the auxiliaries *may, might, would, should*.

**Present Tense:** The first of the simple tenses in the Indicative Mood is the present tense. The present tense in the Indicative Mood, has both Active and Passive voices. The present tense shows action that is happening now.

**Imperfect Tense:** The next tense is the imperfect, which conveys incompleted action in the past. Imperfect means incomplete. When translating an imperfect verb, the simple past tense sometimes works. Other times, "was" plus and "-ing" ending will convey the incompleted past action.

**Future:** The third tense is the future tense. A verb in the future tense conveys action that will happen in the future. The customary auxiliary verb denoting the future tense is "will."

**Perfect Tense:** Generally called the perfect tense, this tense refers to an action that has been completed. Either a simple past tense ending (e.g., "-ed") or the auxiliary verb "have" conveys the perfect tense.

**Pluperfect:** A verb is in the pluperfect tense if it was completed prior to another. Usually the auxiliary verb "had" signifies a pluperfect verb.

**Future Perfect:** Future perfect is used to convey an action that will have been completed prior to something else. "Will have" are the customary auxiliary verbs. In addition to the tenses for verbs in the indicative mood, there is ordinarily one tense in the imperative mood, with both active and passive forms. In the subjunctive mood, there are four tenses, both active and passive: present, imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect.

*This is only a preliminary overview of the tenses and the various endings, you should use your dictionary to full effect as well as search for grammars and use those as references to the rest. The information is not long or hard, but is just detailed.*

## Noun Cases

There are a few noun cases that, when applied to your knowledge of number, gender, and such already, should provide you with the rest of the foundation necessary to successfully do simple translations into Latin or from Latin.

**Nominative:** As a rule of thumb, the nominative will be used whenever you are referring to the subject of the sentence.

**Accusative:** The accusative case in Latin is associated with three main functions, naming the direct object, defining a goal of motion (such as, "to the store," or, "toward the house"), or it indicates the extent to which an action endures, in either temporal or geographical terms.

**Genitive:** The genitive is best thought of as the "adjectival" case: it is used when one wishes to employ one noun to specify something about another. There are many different specific uses of the genitive, but most of them will be translated into English through the use of the preposition "of." One example of this is to show possession, such as, "Tom's House."

**Dative:** The dative case is in some ways the most abstract of the cases and one of the hardest for English speakers to conceptualize. In general, the dative indicates a person or thing who is somehow

interested in or affected by the action in some immediate way. Consistently, the dative will be translated via the English “to” or “for.” The most concrete (and most common) use of the dative is to indicate the indirect object.

**Ablative:** The ablative case in Latin is associated with three main functions: the “true” ablative, indicating separation (as the name implies), the ablative used to indicate location in a specific spot or a rigorously defined area, the ablative indicating instrument (or means) or accompaniment (such as, “They hit me *with a stick.*”)

**Vocative:** The vocative case is used to address someone or something directly. Such addresses stand outside of the construction of the sentence and are really a type of interjection. The vocative is easily recognized: it generally looks exactly like the nominative (the main exception: the vocative singular of second-declension nouns in -us) and is separated from the rest of the sentence by commas.

A number of the above case usages involve the use of prepositional phrases in English — that is, the English translation employs a combination of a preposition and a noun. Latin also uses prepositions, but not as extensively as does English. Often the use of a noun in a specific case all by itself will indicate a notion that in modern English requires a prepositional phrase. That is, the case of the noun all by itself, in accordance with the principles set out above, conveys the sense of the modern English prepositional phrase. When Latin does employ a prepositional phrase, the preposition in effect merely reinforces the sense that is already inherent, in some fashion, in the form of the noun itself.

It should also be noted that articles, direct or indirect (such as “the” or “a”) are absent from Latin. Instead, context must be used to translate such words into the texts appropriately.

## Methods for Translating

When you wish to translate from English to Latin, the first thing you should do is write out your English and determine the sentence parts and structures that are involved. For example, let us say that we wanted to translate the following phrase:

*We are being attacked voraciously by hideous monsters!*

The first thing we must do is separate out the necessary basic parts. We have the Verb (attack), followed by the subject (we), and the indirect object (monsters). The next step is to figure out which parts belong to what. If we look, we will find these parts:

- Subject: “We”
- Verb/Action: “are being attacked voraciously”
- Indirect Object: “by hideous monsters!”

The next part of our task is to first look at the verb, and determine the appropriate tense, number, mood, and voice. If we look here we will see that the voice is Passive (“We” the subject are receiving the direct action of the verb), the number is plural (we), the mood is indicative, and the tense, if we look (despite the -ed at the end of “attacked”), is present (action having continuously now). And we’ll also note that we have an adverb “voraciously” to deal with.

Next, we note that there is no other subject but we, with no adjectives.

Third, we see that there is an adjective on Monster, and that monster is plural, and has a dative case.

Now that we understand how the sentence is structured, we can look at what the words mean. (Note: you can feel free to do these steps as you see fit, but you should at least see the layout of the sentence first, so that you now what words you should look up). We’ll start with the verb first.

Look at our dictionary we will see the following:

*impeto -ere [to make for , attack].*

Here we see that the stem is “impet” and the ending -ere (infinitive) indicates that the word is of the second conjugation. So, we need to then find out what the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural present passive indicative ending in the 2<sup>nd</sup> conjugation is. Looking at our dictionary we will see that the ending is “emur.” So our verb will be “impetemur.”

Next we should figure out what the adverb is. If we look in our dictionary we will find the word “vorax, -is” for “gluttunous, voracious.” So, we have to change this into an adverb. Adverbs are changed by adding a certain ending to the stem of the word. They are by their nature indeclinable. If we look at our dictionary we will see that vorax is of the 3<sup>rd</sup> declension. We can also see that adverbs of the 3<sup>rd</sup> declension are created by adding “-ter” to their stems. One thing that is not clear here is that “vorax” is actually a shortening of “voracs” which means that the stem is “vorac-”, **not** “vora-”. So...here we can see that our adverb should be “voracter.”

Now we move on to the indirect object. The phrase is, “by hideous monsters,” so we should first look up “monsters.” We find “monstrum.” If we look up the declension we will see that it is a 2<sup>nd</sup> declension neuter noun. We know beforehand that the word should be turned into a dative plural, so we look for that ending, and find “-is.” So, we have “monstris.”

We then look up “hideous” and find “informis.” By looking this word up, we find that this is also a 3<sup>rd</sup> declension word. So, we must make it neuter, plural, and dative. Noting that this is an i-stem word and not a consonantal word, we see that the dative plural neuter is “-ibus.” So, our word is “informibus.”

So currently we have all the pieces necessary to do the translation.

- Verb: voracter impetemur (We are being attacked voraciously)
- Object: monstris informibus (by/to/from hideous monsters)

We make the translation, remembering our syntax:

*Monstris informibus voracter impetemur!*

So there you have it, and there you go! You are all set now to do your own translations!