

The Idea of Case and Declension in Latin

Case, in the grammatical sense, refers to the particular **forms and uses** (or functions) of **nouns and pronouns**, and of the **adjectives** that modify them.

Most Latin nouns, pronouns, and adjectives appear only in a limited number of different forms. For example, for the Latin word **alâ** (wing), you will generally see only these forms: **âla / âlae / âlam / âlâ / âlârûm / âlîs / âlâs** . All words in the same "box" or declension as this word will have similar endings. So, for the Latin word **vîta** (life), which is in the same declension as **âla**, you will generally see only these forms: **vîta / vîtae / vîtam / vîtâ / vîtârûm / vîtîs / vîtâs** .

Note: A declension is essentially a **fixed pattern of endings**. There are only six major types of declensions in Latin, five regular ones and one special one for some pronouns and adjectives that has an **-ius** in the genitive case form.

These different forms of the word are called "case-forms" or simply "cases." The different endings indicate the different **cases**, which have special names (like **nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative**). You can therefore say things like "**Âlam** is the accusative singular case of **âla**." Or, seeing the word **âlam**, you can ask "What case is **âlam**?"

The case-endings tell you in what case the word might be, and therefore how it is probably being used in the sentence (what its *function* probably is). For the proper name *Brûtus*, **Brûtus** is the nominative case form. **Brûte** is the vocative case form. **Brûtum** is the accusative case form.

Thus, since the nominative case is used to indicate subjects, you would have to say **Brûtus venit.** = Brutus is coming.

Since the vocative case form is used to indicate words of naming the addressee in direct address, you must say **Et tû, Brûte!** = Even you, Brutus!

And since the direct object of the common verb for I see is put into the accusative case, you say **Brûtum videô.** = I see Brutus.

Note: "Brûtus video" would have to mean "I, Brutus, am seeing."

Recommendation: learn to attend to the meanings of various case forms by doing exercises like those available at the Latin Teaching Materials website. If you see **âlârûm**, do not think "wings," but "*of the wings*." Likewise, when you are learning your vocabulary, pick different case-forms for review, like the *genitive plural*, and try to visualize the meanings and pronounce aloud the forms of the words.

Example of how Latin cases correspond to English usage:

Vocative ▼	Nominative ▼	Dative ▼	Accusative ▼	Genitive ▼	Ablative ▼
Marcus and Julia,	the carpenter	made us	a new door	in the house's	back room.

Marcus and **Julia** are the people who are being directly addressed. These names would be put into the **VOCATIVE** Case.

Carpenter is the subject, the agent that performs the action of the verb. It would be in the **NOMINATIVE** Case.

Us is an indirect object here. Indirect objects tend to be put into the **DATIVE CASE**.

Door is the direct object, the **DIRECT** receiver of the action of the verb. Latin tends to use the **ACCUSATIVE CASE** for direct objects, although some verbs govern other cases.

House's is a noun indicating possession. We are speaking about the door that belongs to the house. Possession is frequently indicated by the **GENITIVE** case.

Room is a noun that is used as an object of the preposition (Ask "In where?" "In the back room."). This preposition in would take an object in the **ABLATIVE** case to indicate place where.

N.B. The **LOCATIVE CASE**, not illustrated here, is used to indicate place, e.g., "at Rome." In Latin, adjectives **new** and **back** have to be in the same case and number as the words they are modifying. **New** must be in the **accusative singular** form, **back** must be in the **ablative singular** form.

Adapted from <http://www.slu.edu/colleges/AS/languages/classical/latin/tchmat/grammar/g-caseid.html> September 12, 2005 . For materials on the declensions, go to <http://www.slu.edu/colleges/AS/languages/classical/latin/tchmat/grammar/whprax/w2-d1.html> and the linked pages.