

An Experiment in Latin Pedagogy

Acceleration Reader Series

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Preface

Many have undertaken the study of Latin without attaining the fluency that might make it the enjoyable as well as useful experience that it ought to be. Even though grammars, dictionaries, and introductions to Latin abound, there is still relatively little material that guides the beginner gradually yet expeditiously towards a confident mastery of classical material. For all too many aspirants, the leap (or toss) into the primary texts has entailed a falling into a kind of void: suddenly, the project slows down, often ending in a perpetual stall. It is not hard to understand why. How many people, after all, actually find themselves attracted by the prospect of inching their way through the strange idioms of an ancient work, supported only by a general acquaintance with grammar, an all-purpose vocabulary, perhaps a huge dictionary with tiny print, and minimal active practice of the language? Under such conditions, reading Latin becomes puzzle-solving, an adventure in decoding, a challenge to patience, a therapeutic escape in “busy work” —anything **but** an instructive and vital encounter with an interesting, complex, and vastly influential culture that often offers great writing, important ideas, valuable teachings, and significant personalities.

Progress that goes too slowly feels like no progress at all. Those who choose to become professional classicists might escape the typical bog, but work-a-day humanists and others who want Latin as a cultural resource and a useful skill rather than as a major life-commitment may well have only a short time of formal study at their disposal to attain the fluency they need. If they are going to get it at all, they must get it in a reasonably timely way.

I believe that those who set out expecting mastery of this language need not be as disappointed as they frequently have been. Without any pretence that the challenges are small or the art easily achieved, this series of Acceleration Readers attempts to help make the learning process more rewarding for those negotiating the intermediate stage. These readers use an extremely simple idea:

Just as punctuation marks have greatly increased our ability to understand texts more quickly and accurately, so can structured typographical design.

We process language in small units of information that in length are usually more than single words but less than entire sentences. The only way to achieve fluency must involve our learning to perceive immediately the constitutive linguistic structures in these units, with a virtually simultaneous comprehension of their intelligible contents. If we do not know that, say, an “if-clause” is an intelligible verbal structure that sets up a certain feeling and an expectation of meaning, and if we can not mentally “get” the shape of its content, then we can not claim to enjoy minimal fluency, much less mastery. Fluency is constituted precisely by that ability to perceive and to comprehend (and sometimes also to produce) such linguistic patterns of meaning with a certain rapidity.

The operations involved are not purely analytical, even though analytical processing of some type can not be absent. Equally important are affectively-toned dimensions like habit and memory. Only continual **practice** in making such **acts of understanding** will strengthen our interpretive abilities into something that looks and feels like mastery. A certain type of vocabulary-drill and grammar-review are necessary helps, especially at the start, but they do not substitute for **repeatedly** encountering the words, phrases, and clauses in context. We must eventually negotiate a certain **quantity** of text with a certain **facility** before we can expect any real sense of linguistic ability. And to attain facility we need to build up a sub-conscious linguistic reservoir of affectively-toned patterns and imagistically-rooted contents that can be engaged immediately.

This series of Acceleration Readers does not itself attempt the preliminary establishment of the students’ inner linguistic archive. But using the readers will foster both the analytical and the holistic mental habits by which intermediate readers can more easily perceive and interpret, with increasing independence, Latin’s **distinctive linguistic patterns of meaning**. The textual design used here should help readers to know how to segment sentences into component parts, always with a view towards connecting those smaller pieces into one integrated whole. A leading maxim is **Divide and conquer--then unify!** Or better:

Divide with the intention of unifying!

The hermeneutic circle is very much in evidence here: the parts are understood in terms of the whole, the whole is understood by the signification achieved through the parts. But there is a further work that the Acceleration Readers have been created to support: the **rehearsal** of that miraculous act of “getting the meaning.” The readers are designed over and against those practices that have students laboring through a translation once and moving on as soon as the meaning has been grasped. **Mastery is not achieved merely by forward motion even through a ream of texts.** Under this aspect, our guiding pedagogical maxim is

Practice comprehension!

Thus we direct ourselves toward real **proficiency** (i.e., practical abilities in using the language) rather than toward some crude scale of "**achievement**" (i.e., coverage of **x** number of lines, of **y** number of vocabulary words, of **z** percentage of the grammar). It is incumbent upon teachers to make clear to students that what is desired is **multum** rather than **multa**.

By familiarizing themselves with this presentation of classical material, learners will gain the ability to understand more rapidly even normally printed texts in Latin, especially those by the same author or in the same style. Readers need not look up every unfamiliar word to begin to learn it, or know every definition in order to make substantial advances in their understanding of the language: getting a feel for structures is at least as important as knowing full dictionary definitions. Memorizing or near-memorizing phrases even with only the vaguest of understandings still contributes greatly to the development of an "ear" for the units of a language. The format of these readers helps the process of learning by typographically isolating the structures that carry the meanings. Furthermore, learning should be accelerated because the isolation of individual words and phrases helps clarify for the students exactly what they understand and what remains murky.

Success in interpretations, even of fragments, should create something of that feeling of progress that is one of the best tonics for learning. But having realistic expectations is important. A base-hit is not all that easily achieved in baseball even by professionals; just so a perfect and immediate grasp of a long and elaborate Latin sentence is not something that one should expect until after much practice. But learners can certainly expect to comprehend more and more material more and more quickly during the initial years of study.

Conventions of High-Segmentation Acceleration Readers

The **visually-represented segmentation** of sentences into units of meaning allows an easier path to the goal of linguistic fluency. Every effort is made to keep sentences together, within the bounds of its own column, but where there are compound or especially long sentences, breaks have been inserted as a help for focusing on intelligible units. Though there is a certain variability in the presentation of some structures there will be a high degree of consistency in the presentation of the text, but the guiding principle is

Segment the text in the way that seems to facilitate comprehension best.

Readers do not have to master all the conventions in order to use them profitably, but a basic general understanding will be very helpful. The **vertical presentation of the material** may feel unfamiliar at first, but any awkwardness should soon disappear with a little rehearsal. The decisive thing will be the readers' repeated practice of unifying at the level of meaning what can strike the eye as disjointed. It will be especially worthwhile to read aloud (with understanding) the smaller and larger sections that have been identified, in order to

learn to sense the unity of the patterns that hang together. More advanced readers will need far less indentational help, of course, and as students progress, they will be able to take in larger units of meaning, until the ordinary "continuous" horizontal presentation will pose no special difficulties. Acceleration Readers with lower degrees of segmentation are planned precisely to help this advancement in learners' abilities. If they can start off with medium or low segmentation, they should do so.

Spacing achieved through indentation and line-breaks is the main punctuational device that helps the readers to identify and to process the smaller units of meaning in the context of the entire sentence. This method goes beyond the old pedagogical device of sense-lines to incorporate a kind of "diagramming without lines," showing subordination, modification, etc.

The two basic rules for the high-segmentation format are the following:

1. Place the subjects, objects, and verbs of main clauses flush left.

She
left
it.

2. Indent words, phrases, and clauses to show some kind of subordination.

The jovial
postman
from the local office
left
the large, unidentified
box
at the doorstep
of one
of the most expensive homes
in the neighborhood.

These two rules allow for some variety, since one could choose to indent the phrase **the most expensive homes** even further as

of
the most expensive
homes.

Of governs **homes**; **the** and **most expensive** modify the same word. But placing these on one line does not seem to hinder comprehension, so the single-line format seems better here. If the preposition governed two or more objects, a more highly segmented solution might have been chosen. Notice also in this example, **at the doorstep** modifies the verb **left**, so that it ought not be indented further than it is. Occasionally such breaks in the sequence of modification can be signalled by the tilde (~):

left~
the large, unidentified
box
~at the doorstep

The first two rules sometimes stand in tension with each other. One could claim that the object of a verb is in some sense subordinate to it grammatically or that the subject in a way stands over the verb. But there remains an advantage in visually marking the core elements of the kernel of the sentence, so that putting these elements flush left aids clarity in a particular way. Readers should learn to sense the grammatical importance of words in this position. However, it is still necessary that they make the effort to understand the words **in the order in which they are given**, bit by bit, keeping the various parts in mind until the whole meaning is comprehended.

The first two rules of segmentation are not exactly paralleled in the representation of subordinate clauses, where the convention will be

3. **Bracket subordinate clauses by placing their opening conjunctions or relative pronouns and their verbs flush left in the clause's indented position, and put the subject and object on the next line of indentation.**

[Although
you
quickly
left,]
others
stayed.

Such bracketing seems to be one of the best ways of visually isolating these subordinate structures, making them independently graspable units of meaning. In Latin, frequently but not always, the clause will begin with a conjunction and end with its governing verb, so that you will often see the following:

[conjunction / relative pronoun
subject
indirect object
direct object
verb.]

The last general rule that needs to be mentioned here is the following:

4. **Keep units of parallel grammatical weight in line with each other and in agreement with the general rules given above.**

Hence, a word in apposition will be directly over or above its correlate, and a clause that stands as an object will parallel the place given to single-word objects.

The consuls
Lucius and Manlius
did not know
[what
 they
should do
 to gain
 entrance
 into the meeting.]

Punctuation and diagrammatical marks are kept to a minimum in these readers in order to avoid distraction. But there will be certain markings that will be most helpful for sectioning off for the eye units of meaning that can be quickly comprehended. Readers who have difficulty understanding an entire sentence might be encouraged by being able at least to understand some of the units that are so marked out. Readers who have trouble with particular types of units (e.g., ablative absolutes), can be directed to the syntactical compendium (see below) where many parallel examples will have been gathered.

Parentheses set off prepositional phrases.

Slashes and braces enclose various other word-groups or phrases within phrases (e.g., ablative absolutes, participial phrases, or genitive and ablative phrases).

Italics identify the very important **accusative-with-infinitive construction** along with the verb or expression governing it. The general practice will be to put the **subject** of the infinitive flush with the infinitive itself; the **object** of the infinitive will be indented by one tab. Thus the reader will be able to see which accusative stands as the subject of the expression, and which as the object. **Historical infinitives** are treated like regular main verbs in independent clauses.

SMALL CAPS will sometimes be used for structurally significant particles like “both...and”; “so much... [that]”; “not only...but also”; etc.

The Apprenticeship Model

Some study with a trained Latinist will of course be helpful for learning how to resolve the ambiguities that remain, the ranges of meanings of words, the stylistic features, the cultural background necessary for understanding, the larger implications of the text, and so on. For students who have already completed a thorough study of morphology and syntax, I recommend some type of apprenticeship model over that all-too-common, all-too-laborious method of round-robin translation. Students need some standard to imitate, first of all. The teachers will provide this by modeling the process of understanding, reading through the text section by section, and suggesting how one comes to an understanding of it. I am not

speaking of direct translation here. Teachers can use an “interlanguage” (a crude English parallel to the Latin form of expression), along with commentary on the force of the syntax and word-meanings, to suggest what is being conveyed by the text. Students’ appreciation of linguistic and stylistic matters will deepen as they hear their teachers saying things like “In English, our idiomatic way of expressing such an idea is such-and-such, or we might sometimes say such-and-such, but the Latin takes this form, which has the implication of such-and-such” or “You see that Latin can use a single participle to express what we would tend to take an entire subordinate clause to say.” They will get a deeper familiarity for Latin if they will hear teachers frequently commenting on the range of possible uses of common words. They will even get a broader rhetorical education when their teachers will go on to say things like, “You see how Caesar is constantly relying on the ablative absolute for a certain rapidity and conciseness in his narrative.” And finally, students will profit in a great variety of ways as teachers keep referring to the larger meanings involved in the work being read, in order to flesh out, for example, the cultural-historical context and the authorial purposes as they can best be understood. In this way, teachers simultaneously build up the students’ sense of culture, of the author, of their first language as well as of Latin, of literature, and of the subject that the text is treating. Thus “mere philology” will become a better means of access to the greater purposes of a liberal education.

But the most important thing for language-mastery will be **dwelling on the Latin**, repeating it phrase by phrase, or in progressively extended units, with clues for understanding sometimes given parenthetically, so that the students can be hearing and reading the Latin text with some **inner act of meaning that is more closely connected with the original language than with any polished English version of it**. Students, of course, should not be transcribing the interlingual translation that the teacher might be making, but they might be noting down important idioms, or lexical forms of verb parts, and so on, for study later. At the next class, they can be held accountable for understanding the text and for being able to read it aloud, with proper intonation and phrasing. At the very least, a quiz can be given, with phrases drawn from the previous class’s work. With such a method, the teachers’ efforts are much less impeded if, not having to wait for students to stumble through a translation, they can discourse economically on the meanings of the words, content, etc., and they can move forward in the text with enough impetus to keep the interest focused on the literary texture and the meanings of the work being understood.

The Syntactical Compendia

This series will also contain **syntactical compendia** which gather in an edited form some typical structures and patterns so that readers will be able to begin to grasp them more readily even when they encounter them in a more complicated contexts. There will be lists that gather from the text many examples structures like the following:

Accusative-with-infinitive Constructions
Subordinate clauses
Adjectival phrases, including participles
Gerunds and gerundives in context
Ablative absolutes
Ablative phrases
Prepositional phrases
Genitive phrases
Idioms, special phrases, miscellaneous usages

These lists can be used by teachers or students for **prelection, review, testing, exercise, or composition**. They can be used to practice the resolution of ambiguity, as in the case of the quod-clauses. Even if the full context is sometimes needed for complete understanding, one can still consider the individual clause and ask about how far we are able to know what this set of words might mean. That is, one can at least learn **to identify the range of ambiguity** on the basis of such units. The lists can highlight features of style, and therefore promote literary sensitivity as well as grammatical insights, and they can also be used to help develop familiarity with recurring sound-patterns like those of the various ablative endings in the ablative absolutes. Lists of significant particle-words and miscellaneous phrases are given for the development and practice of important understanding skills at a micro-level. **Capitalization** in these compendia serves to indicate items of special relevance, for example, the particular verbs and expressions that can govern accusative-with-infinitive constructions, or the moods of the verbs that will follow certain conjunctions.

A Note on the Texts

The texts in this series are not meant to be used for advanced philological analysis. When possible, they are taken from the copyright-free texts in the Libellus directory provided on the internet through the kindness of private benefactors and through the resources of University of Washington, but they are corrected by comparison with the texts from the current Loeb edition or from that of other versions.

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