A New Latin Primer

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A New Latin Primer

Mary C. English

Georgia L. Irby

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A NEW LATIN PRIMER offers beginning students a solid overview of Latin grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. For the most part, it features a traditional, grammar-based approach to the language and emphasizes vocabulary from standard classical authors. Grammatical explanations are spare and to the point, and they are illustrated by unadapted Latin examples so that students learn from Roman authors how to employ the syntax under discussion. Each of the thirty-six lessons contains twelve short practice sentences (eight from Latin to English; four from English to Latin) as well as fifteen passages of unadapted Latin from a wide variety of important classical and medieval authors (Catullus, Vergil, Horace, Ovid, Martial, Caesar, Cicero, Livy, Sallust, Tacitus, Augustus, Seneca the Younger, Pliny the Younger, Pliny the Elder, Augustine, Bede, inter alios). These passages are formatted with unfamiliar vocabulary and explanatory notes provided immediately below the readings so that students can transition easily from this textbook to more advanced Latin courses. All of the selections in a single lesson are tailored to one or two specific aspects of Roman culture or history. Thus they remind the students that the study of Latin provides firsthand access to the texts that shape our understanding of the Roman world. The cultural sections are as crucial to our textbook as the grammatical explanations, and instructors should budget time to review these essays in class. We feel strongly that an introductory sequence in Latin should offer students a window into Roman literature and culture; grammar and translation exercises should be viewed as a means to that end and not as the primary objective of the class.

We intend for the Primer to be used as flexibly as possible: as an introductory course over two or three semesters, as a self-study volume, or as an intensive review. Some instructors may wish to assign all of the passages in a given lesson, while others may prefer to assign a selection of them, reserving the Extra Passages
for quizzes and exams. Some lessons may take one class period (e.g., NLP 1), others several (e.g., NLP 2 and 3). In our experience, most lessons should take two days: one for grammar and drills, another for translating passages. The companion Workbook to A New Latin Primer features a variety of drills, additional practice sentences, directed English-to-Latin translation practice, and word games to reinforce grammar, vocabulary, and culture. We invite students and teachers to use these exercises in full or to select from them as it seems best.

In formatting the Primer, we have used the Oxford Classical Texts (OCTs) for the Latin text. To aid students in pronunciation and the identification of forms, we have included macrons for all of the passages in the text and glossaries. We have followed the governing principle of the Oxford Latin Dictionary and marked all vowels that are long by nature. For the inscriptions, we have retained the texts as they have come down to us, but we have expanded all abbreviations, indicated by parentheses (e.g., NLP 1.12 and 1.13), and we have provided notes for scribal errors in grammar and syntax (e.g., NLP 1.7). The major collections of inscriptions used in the Primer include CIL (Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum), ILS (Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae), and RIB (Roman Inscriptions of Britain).

Like the Little Latin Reader, the New Latin Primer is the product of our combined vision, and all aspects of this book result from our joint and equal contributions. Furthermore, many individuals helped make A New Latin Primer possible. We would like to thank Charles Cavaliere, our editor at Oxford University Press, and his assistant Christi Sheehan, who both provided many wonderful suggestions for this book. We would also like to thank the following people who reviewed (and, in some cases, class-tested) the manuscript in various stages of development and provided invaluable feedback: Gareth Williams, Columbia University; Mary Pendergraft, Wake Forest University; Donald E. Connor, Trinity School; Blaise Nagy, College of the Holy Cross; T. Davina McClain, Northwestern State University; John Henkel, Georgetown College; Linda W. Gillison, University of Montana–Missoula; John Klopacz, Stanford University; Madeleine M. Henry, Purdue University; John Carlevale, Berea College; Emily E. Batinski, Louisiana State University; Elizabeth Anne Manwell, Kalamazoo College; Zoe Kontes, Kenyon College; Prudence Jones, Montclair State University; Keely Lake, Wayland Academy; and Katherine Panagakos, Stockton University.

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LATIN LANGUAGE

Latin is a member of the Indo-European family of languages, sharing grammatical structure and root vocabulary with other languages spoken in Europe, parts of central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, such as Greek, German, Russian, Anglo-Saxon, and even Sanskrit. Not all European languages are Indo-European; Basque, for example, predates the spread of Indo-European languages westward into Spain and developed in isolation from them. Likewise, Hungarian and Finnish are related to each other, but they also developed in isolation from Indo-European languages.

Indo-European languages share many common features of grammar, syntax, and base vocabulary, and the most common words are easily recognized from one language to the next. Let us consider just one example, the word for “mother”:

- English: mother
- Sanskrit: mātar
- Greek: mētēr
- Latin: māter
- Anglo-Saxon: mōdor
- Old Irish: máthir
- Lithuanian: mote
- Russian: mat

In all of these languages, the word for “mother” is similar in spelling and pronunciation. All of these words for “mother” derive from the root word *mēh₂tēr* in Proto-Indo-European, the earliest reconstructable incarnation of this language family. Consequently, we call Indo-European languages “cognate” because they
are related to each other linguistically and derived from the same parent language, Proto-Indo-European. The words themselves (like our variant Indo-European words for “mother”) are also called “cognate”.

As Rome grew and extended into the larger Mediterranean world, Roman officials and soldiers brought with them not only their system of government, institutions, and wares, but they also introduced their language, Latin, to the western Mediterranean. Just like Greek in the east, Latin became the language of administration and commerce in the west. To deal with Rome, one had to learn Latin. Both the Greeks and the Romans were proud of their languages and often notoriously refused to learn other languages. Educated Greeks condescended to learn Latin as a matter of survival, but Cato the Elder refused to use Greek, a language which he knew well but considered unworthy of Roman dignity.

As Latin spread, it began to mingle with local languages, influencing and reshaping them. Today the modern Romance languages (“from Rome,” “according to Roman practice”) are spoken in lands that were strongholds of the Roman Empire: Spanish in Spain (Hispania), French in France (Gallia), Italian in Italy (Italia), Romanian in Romania (Dacia), and Portuguese in Portugal (Lusitania). These languages, cognate with one another, are derivatives of Latin. Rome never gained a secure foothold in Germany; Britain, although thoroughly Romanized, was abandoned by the Romans in the fifth century CE, before local Celtic languages had been stamped out and forgotten. Latin’s influence on the English language is indirect, through Medieval French, introduced when Duke William II from Normandy in northern coastal France defeated the Anglo-Saxon King Harold II (“Card Face”) on October 14, 1066 at Hastings in southern England. These political ties were eventually severed in 1204, and, although English was still spoken in the homes of the peasants and managed to reassert itself as the language of politics and business, English had been irrevocably changed by an influx of redundant and “courtly” words (e.g., the hoof stock bleating in the courtyard might be a lamb or a sheep, but on the plate it was known by the French-derived “mutton”).

THE NATURE OF THE LATIN LANGUAGE

Two terms, grammar and syntax, are important for our discussions about Latin. Grammar involves the forms of words (e.g., singular versus plural). Compare a
student learns Latin (singular subject with singular verb) and students learn Latin (plural subject with plural verb). Syntax involves how words fit together into coherent sentences (subjects, direct objects, etc.).

English is a word-ordered language wherein meaning is conveyed by the word’s position within the sentence. Subjects are usually first, and verbs next, followed by direct objects. From our example above (students learn Latin), students is the subject, explaining who does the learning, learn is the verb, explaining what action occurs in our sentence, and Latin is the direct object, explaining what is being learned. Reversing the word order renders a sentence that is illogical: Latin learns students.

In Latin, endings (“inflection”), rather than word order, convey meaning. As a result, words can appear in any order at all. English carries a vestige of inflection in its system of pronouns. Consider the following sentences in English:

Marcus and Flavia are siblings.
He sees Flavia.
Flavia protects him.
Flavia returns his toy.

He, him, and his all replace Marcus in their respective sentences. Notice how the spelling changes slightly, depending on whether Marcus performs the action (he), is affected by the action (him), or possesses an object (his). In these cases, the word order could be altered slightly without affecting the meaning, though the new sentences may sound stilted. For example: He Flavia sees (Marcus is still doing the seeing, and Flavia is still being seen); Him Flavia protects (Flavia is still doing the protecting, and Marcus is still being protected); His toy Flavia returns (the toy still belongs to Marcus). Consider the following Latin example: tenet error amantem (“uncertainty holds a lover”). The first word tenet is the verb, explaining the action of the sentence, the subject error, which performs the action of “holding,” appears in the middle, and the direct object amantem, the person being held by uncertainty, is at the end. No matter in what order the words appear, the meaning and translation remain the same. Because of this, Latin (along with many other Indo-European languages) is characterized as “inflected.” Despite this fact, Latin sentences often follow the standard word order of subject, direct object, verb, and this basic word order can provide essential clues to help the reader disentangle phrases and clauses in longer, more complex sentences.
**BASIC PARTS OF SPEECH**

Recognizing words by their parts of speech is one of many skills necessary for reading and translating challenging Latin passages. There are eight parts of speech, and only four of them are “inflected” (i.e., change their spelling/endings according to their meaning within a sentence).

**Verb:** describes an action or state of being: *Hic habitat felicitas.* (“Luck lives here”). The verb *habitat* explains what Luck does.

**Noun:** person, place, thing, idea: *Hic habitat felicitas.* (“Luck lives here”). The noun *felicitas* explains who is doing the living.

**Pronoun:** replaces a noun: *Amo te, Facilis* (“I love you, Facilis”). The pronoun *te* replaces *Facilis.*

**Adjective:** modifies a noun or pronoun: *Magus malus est.* (“The magician is bad”). The adjective *malus* describes the magician.

**Adverb:** modifies a verb, adverb, or adjective: *Hic habitat felicitas.* (“Luck lives here”). The adverb *hic* explains where Luck lives.

**Preposition:** denotes a spatial or temporal relationship to a noun: *Felix cum Fortunata.* (“Felix with Fortunata”). The preposition *cum* explains the spatial relationship between Felix and Fortunata.

**Conjunction:** joins two words or clauses: *Clodius hic et ubici amabiliter* (“Clodius amiably here and everywhere”).

**Interjection:** expression of emotion, surprise or pleasure: *vae!* (“woe!”)

In the required vocabulary lists for each lesson, vocabulary words are arranged by part of speech (nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, interjections), and within each part of speech, words are further organized by declension or conjugation group as appropriate.

**THE LATIN ALPHABET AND PRONUNCIATION**

The Roman alphabet evolved over time, as some letters were added and others dropped out (the emperor Claudius, in fact, tried unsuccessfully to introduce three new letters to the alphabet, though some inscriptions from his reign still
show his letters). Some letters were almost interchangeable (g and c). And the letters y and z came into the Latin alphabet from Greek in the late 1st century BCE. The alphabet known to our Romans lacked the letters j and w.

Many sources do describe the sounds of the Latin language, so we can be reasonably certain about pronunciation.

**Vowels:** Some vowels are short, and others are long. In *A New Latin Primer*, long vowels will be marked by macrons. The difference in the pronunciation between long and short vowels is one of quantity, not quality, and long vowels will take twice as long to pronounce.

- a: like “car”  
- á: like “bought”
- e: like “get”  
- é: like “clay”
- i: like “tin”  
- ì: like “green”
- o: like “hot”  
- ó: like “drove”
- u: like “foot”  
- ù: like “food”

N.B. Although the Romans occasionally indicated long vowels with a stroke (Róma), by doubling the vowel (Rooma), or by writing it larger than the other letters (rOmanus), this practice was not consistent, and the Romans did not use macrons. We include them here as an aid to both pronunciation and identification (compare: venit [“he/she/it comes”] and vēnit [“he/she/it has come”]; or liber [“book”] and liber [“free”]). Our approach has been conservative, and we mark only those vowels that are long by nature, in accord with the governing principle of the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.

**Diphthongs:** Some combinations of two vowels work together to produce a single sound.

- ae: like “mile”
- au: like “spouse”
- ei: like “tame”
- eu: like “mew”
- oe: like “toil”
- ui: like “Louis” (rare: found only in the following forms: huius, cuius, huic, cui)
Consonants: For the most part, the consonants are much the same in Latin and English. Note the following qualifications:

- c and g are always hard in Classical Latin: like “coat” and “gone”
- q is always followed by a consonantal u: like “quick” and “quiz”
- r is always rolled (as in Spanish) and was called the *littera canīna* (the dog-letter) because it sounded like a growling dog
- s is always unvoiced (as in “send”) and never is pronounced with “z” variant (as in “tease”)
- ch, ph, and th are from aspirated Greek consonantal characters, and the “h” is pronounced as a puff of air: like “chorus”, “top hat”, and “pet hamster”
- v is pronounced like English w
- i as a consonant will be followed by another vowel and pronounced like an English “y”: *Iulius, Troia*. Some texts transliterate this i as the letter j, which did not exist in the Latin alphabet of classical times (*Julius, Troja*)

Syllables: A Latin word has as many syllables as it has vowels and diphthongs. To divide Latin words into syllables, consider the following:

Two contiguous vowels or a vowel next to a diphthong divide into two syllables: *tu-us, tu-ae*.

A single consonant between two vowels/diphthongs is pronounced with the second vowel: *do-cē-re, ni-hil, Trō-ia, Iu-li-us*.

If two or more consonants separate vowels/diphthongs, generally the consonants divide between the two syllables: *mit-tō, pu-el-la*.

A “stop” (*b, c, d, g, p, t*) + a “liquid” (*l, r*) count as a single consonant and will go with the second vowel/diphthong: *a-grī, ves-tra, ex-clu-dō, tem-plum*.

In compound words, the composite parts remain intact: *ab-esse, ex-eō, ex-i-stō*.

- ch, gu, ph, th, and qu always count as a single consonant: *ar-chi-tec-tus, at-que, lin-gua, re-lin-quus*.
- x, however, counts as a double consonant and is split between the two syllables: *du-xit = duc-sit, vexō = vec-sō*. 
Accentuation: As in English, Latin words are pronounced by giving one syllable a little extra emphasis. Consider the following:

In words of two syllables, the accent falls on the first syllable: *ni-hil*, *tu-us*.

In words of three or more syllables, the accent falls on the penult (second to last syllable) if the penult is long (e.g., has a macron, is a diphthong, or is followed by two consonants): *po-e-ta*, *po-e-ta-rum*, *do-ce-re*, *Mi-no-tau-rus*, *pu-el-la*.

In words of three or more syllables, the accent falls on the antepenult (third to last syllable) if the penult is short: *ca-pi-mus*, *fe-li-ci-tas*, *pa-tri-bus*, *vo-lu-cris*.