

Verbal Brilliance in Latin:

A Modular Plan for Building Verb Mastery and Learning the Language

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Preface: Why This Approach?

What is the quickest way to solid mastery of the language?

I have often thought that many of us Latin-learners have been mentally overwhelmed by the sheer number of forms and words and bits of grammatical data that we encounter early on. Consider the verbs that worry us with slight alterations here and there in six possible tenses, in three possible persons (singular and plural), in two possible voices, in three possible moods and several verbals, across five conjugations, from full-transitives to deponents and semi-deponents and irregulars and defectives. On the way through these diverse fields, we are usually asked to sort out the six major declensions of nouns and pronouns, with their five major cases in singular and plural forms, along with the three major types of adjectives, the second of which has its own interesting variability.

It does not help that on the concurrent march through the essential vocabulary, we do not usually "deep-process" the words, so that as a result we must repeatedly interrupt the flow of reading with a turn to dictionary or word-lists. How many texts re-cycle the various forms and usages of its vocabulary 70 or 100 times in such a way that students can sense that they have attained some real, even if fragmentary, control.

Our puzzlement with Latin also seems exponentially related to sentence-lengths. We can be very quick on those one-word, two-word, or three-word sentences, but we find ourselves laboring when we get to units of five or six or seven words, to say nothing of the Ciceronian cascades at the somewhat fluent understanding of which so many dream of arriving before the fourth year of study. We have not given adequate attention to creating a successful program that is based on *lexical phrases*. Not learning to read in "chunks," we should not be surprised that we might have attained a vast vocabulary and yet still crawl like a distracted, drowsy snail through even moderately challenging prose.

Why not build a course, then, partly on the idea of first achieving mastery of **single-word sentences** which can then be expanded in the direction of larger units of meaning? Verbs are a natural focus since they are often equivalent to single-word sentences that are usually translated by several words in English.

The possibility of focusing on verb-mastery suggests a solution to a major desideratum in Latin pedagogy, i.e., putting some of the most common verb-forms into the early days of the course. Why should students wait until the second semester to begin to deal with participles, or until the third semester to face some subjunctives or deponents? Of course the delay of such forms has been necessary to temper the onrush of new data, but this comes at a cost of painfully limited prose. But people learn languages most effectively by repeatedly encountering and interpreting and employing manageable phrases, usually *apart* from any ability to produce paradigms and grammatical explanations of all of the elements of those phrases. Perhaps the acquisition of the language may indeed be speeded up by bracketing off paradigm-knowledge in certain exercises. It seems reasonable to propose the principle that **important clues to meaning can be given in any order without hindering the later integration**. A practical approach, for example, could mention (*even on the first day of class*) that "when you see **-urus**, or some such ending with a verb-form, there is a meaning of "about to do something." One needn't define all the participles or their declensional aberrations. Such a clue is simple and concise and therefore more likely to be remembered and used strategically in reading. It begins to clear things up. It is a datum that will later be integrated into a more comprehensive systematic understanding. The *narrative* is left freer for the reader's attention and memory.

Verb-forms are ubiquitous and perhaps the greatest single challenge for understanding at the single-word level. Therefore, if students could *master the verb-forms* early in the Latin course, they will have something that is absolutely essential for a well-grounded mastery. But a Latin course has two overriding demands: *simplicity* and *interest*. If it is not simple, confusion and discouragement creep in. Students begin to feel they are getting nowhere.

It may seem best, therefore, to approach the entire verb through a **single conjugation** and simplify further by taking **only the third-person singular forms**. Thus possible distractions by the personal endings are removed, and the emphasis can be put precisely on the other elements that allow the verb to vary its meaning so extensively. The way is then open toward learning well those **significant clues to tense and mood and voice**. Once these are really mastered, the other personal forms of the same conjugation can be easily added, before the incremental addition of the other conjugations. Those conjugations will be learned much more quickly, of course, because of the many similarities with what has already been learned so well.

But what of *interest*? It is hard to make one-word sentences in the third-person singular of the first conjugation interesting without a narrative. Some interest will come from the positive feeling of **increasing mastery** and from the **growing intellectual challenge** of cumulative exercises. But this is not enough to sustain an entire course. Such an approach should therefore be accompanied by the study of **simple and engaging narratives** that involve all kinds of verb forms from the very first. I am thinking of something like Lhomond's *Epitome Historiae Sacrae*, which presents intrinsically interesting and important materials in simple Latin summary, without making any compositionally awkward attempt to save all the participles or subjunctives or deponents for a given point in the sequence.

A procedure already tried to good effect with this reader consists of taking a story a day. The teacher reads the story aloud phrase by phrase, pausing for translation and comments, while the students follow from a bilingual edition laid out in acceleration-reader format. A few of the students are then asked to read the story aloud while the rest of the class is expected to try to get the meanings as they hear / read the Latin words. When the pages are put away, the teacher can ask students phrases randomly to see if they can remember the meanings. At the beginning of the next class, the students are quizzed on the story. No grammar is needed, only a knowledge that *those* words mean *this*. Even students quite challenged by the grammar could do this kind of learning quite well, and they proved it on the major tests. As students grow in their command of grammar and vocabulary, the teacher can start demanding from the students some ability to go from the English to the Latin.

With this approach, students have a **real experience of reading** that is almost impossible for them if they are forced to constantly refer to vocabulary-lists, dictionaries at the back of the book, footnotes, charts, etc. **Only if readers learn to register the meanings and functions of the parts of a sentence bit-by-bit in its unfolding will they have the satisfactions that accompany the act of smooth and fluent reading.** With the bilingual acceleration-reader, they need only look over at the phrase's translation on the other side of the page. Meanwhile, in the grammatically-oriented class-time, they are gradually learning to recognize more and more of the way the details fit into a larger linguistic system. This unfolding "revelation" of the structures of meaning can also help sustain an attitude of interest.

The exercises and explanation pages given here need not be used in the manner I have just sketched. They are *modular*. They can be used at any time and with any textbook to strengthen students' morphological knowledge, even while they are closer to the learning of **phrases** than to the mastery of **tables and charts**. In line with this approach, I have been forced to adopt certain conventions. I have wanted to allow for the use of phrasal meaning in the source-language as the primary point of departure. Thus, for example, "*x would love*" in these exercises is a contrary-to-fact expression rather than the second part of a should-would construction. What is gained here is the speed that comes from **not** being mentally routed to the abstract level where we find the term "imperfect subjunctive."

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