Via Brevis

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This aims at being the short route to learning to read Latin for enjoyment. It attempts to pick out the minimum you need to know in order to get the drift of Latin writing. To write Latin, you need to know a lot more than outlined here.

Latin was mainly a spoken language. Vergil's Aeneid was recited to audiences who understood it as it was recited. Ignore advice to "Look for the subject, then the verb, then the object" which will limit you to decoding rather than understanding. Only as a last resort when you cannot understand the sentence as written should you start hunting for subject, then verb, then object.

Read Latin aloud to yourself first - to get the rhythm and any poetic quality. Then reread the sentences while trying to identify the meanings of word endings as you read each word in order. If you have ever listened to the UN simultaneous translaters rendering Russian into English, you will get the idea - "waiting for the verb" - blah blah - "waiting for the verb".

To read any language, you need to know the vocabulary. With Latin this is easy because nearly all key words have cognates in English. There are a few false friends but not many. The hardest words are the short connectives: e.g.: sed, enim, ut, nam, etc. Get a good vocabulary book and learn them.

1   Declensions

Nouns and adjectives have so-called case endings which distinguish the grammatical function of words in a sentence. The tables of different endings are called declensions. Traditionally Latin teachers taught their pupils to learn them off by heart in order. e.g. dominus, domine, dominum, domini, domino, domino. The idea was that, on reading say **domino**, you would rattle down the list until you encountered the match. This method of learning is a conspicuous failure. To enjoy reading the language you need instant comprehension of the -o ending.

The 3 important cases to learn are the *subject*, the *object*, and the *with* forms (or nominative, accusative, ablative as they are labeled in traditional grammars). The ablative should really have been labeled *instrumental*.

Learn:

- singular: -s, -m, -v̄ for subject, object, with. v̄ means long vowel.

- plural: -i or v̄s, v̄s, īs or -bus for subject, object, with

Traditional Latin grammars define 5 declensions numbered 1 to 5 (or I to V). This is not very useful. Instead think of them as vowel based: -a, -o, -e or i or ϕ, u, and finally e. The vowel is the last part of the stem.

I	II	III	IIII	V
-a	-o	-e,-i,ϕ	-u	-ē
puella	servus	civis	spiritus	dies

1.1   Remarks

- The -a types are nearly all feminine (exceptions are men's jobs: **poeta**, **agricola**, etc). Exceptional in that they lost the -s for subject (puellas -> **puella**). But **Aeneas** keeps his -s!

- In -o types the o weakens to u (servos -> **servus**) where o is in a final closed syllable. This makes them largely indistinguishable from the u-types but it doesn't matter except for of-singular where spiritus (meaning:of breath) looks like a subject. In books it will have a macron over the ū. The o-types (and the a-types) have their counterparts in Greek syntax but without the weakening of o to u. Note that the -o has reasserted itelf in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and other Romance languages (but not in French).

- The -e, -i, ϕ have a weak or non-existent vowel. e.g. (rex is based on the stem: reg-).

    - ϕ represents no vowel. There are words whose stems don't end in a vowel. e.g. reg-, duc-, etc meaning king, leader.
    - -e words have their stems ending in short e (-ĕ)
    - -i words have their stems ending in -i (e.g. **civis** citizen)

- The -u type is rare and in later Latin got absorbed into the -o declension (e.g. **spritus** breath).

- The -e type is extremely rare: e.g. **res**, **dies**, **requies** (thing, day, rest)

Some phonetic evolution in Latin:

1. Intervocalic -s- (s between vowels) becomes r. e.g. bodies: corposa -> **corpora**

2. -ŏs becomes -us. e.g. corpos -> **corpus**, servos -> **servus**. But note that is for short vowels only. obj plural **servōs** remains servōs

3. -im weakens to -em (except for adverbs e.g. **interim**, **verbatim**).

4. -ai -> -ae and oi -> -i. servois -> servīs, servoi -> **servī**, puellai -> **puellae**

2   Cases

Traditional Latin grammars identify the following cases with names like genitive, dative, etc. Again these labels are not useful. Instead use the following:

		singular	plural
nominative	subject	-s	-i or -v̄s
vocative			
accusative	object	-m	long vowel -s
genitive	of	-i | -s	-rum | -um
dative	for	-i	
ablative	with	-v̄ or - ĕ	is | bus

- Neuter words are exceptional

    - Subject and Object have the same form
        * plurals end in -a (e.g. **corpora**, **vira**,)
        * singular -o types end in -um (....)
        * no -a type neuters

- -o types have no for-case. They use the with-case instead. To disambiguate words like servo

    - If it is a person, it means for (e.g. **servō** = for the slave, **servīs** = for the slaves)

- If it is a thing, it means with (e.g. **gladio** = with a sword, **gladiīs** = with swords)

- The with-case is also used for other meanings (like from, at, in, etc) but, if so, will always have a preposition before it: (e.g. in, e(x), cum, a(b), etc). The so-called ablative (=take-away) was one of 3 earlier cases: ablative, locative, instrumental (take-away, where, with) which collapsed into one case. I believe that Russian still has all 3.

- The -o and -a types when they add an -i, suffer phenetic changes

  - -ai -> ae (pronounced as just -e rhyming with say)
  - -oi -> i

- Don't bother learning the vocative case. It only survived in the -o type singular and later disappeared altogether. It ends in -e (**Domine**, **Marce**, etc). The vocative was restricted to names and titles. (e.g.

  - **Domine non sum dignus**
  - but
  - **Agnus Dei**, ... **dona nobis pacem** (not Agne Dei ...).

- Concentrate on learning just subject, object, and with-cases.

  - The of-case (genitive) is rarer. It disappeared later and was replaced by de + with-case. e.g. **Sancta Maria de Angelis** (rather than **Sancta Maria Angelorum**). Also 2 famous classical works: **de Bello Gallico** by J Caesar and **de Rerum Natura** by Lucretius
  - There is no for-case (dative) in plurals or o-type singulars, so just remember the -ī ending for singular.

singular		-a	-o	-e,-i,-zero	-u	-e
subj	-s	-	os->us	-s	-s	-s
obj	-m	-m	om->um	-(e)m	-m	-m
with	long vowel	-a	-o	-e	-u	-e
for	-i	ai->ae		-i	-i	-i
of	-i or -s	ai->ae	or->i	-is	-s	-i

plural		-a	-o	-e,-i,-zero	-u	-e
subj	-i or -v̄s	-ai -> -ae	-oi -> -i	-ēs	-ūs	-ēs
obj	-v̄s	-ās	-ōs	-ēs	-ūs	-ēs
with	-īs or -bus	-is	-is	-(i)bus	-bus	-bus
for						
of	-rum	arum	orum	-(i)um	-um	rum

Examples

singular		-a	-o	-e,-i,zero	-u	-e
subj		puella	servus	civis	spiritus	dies
obj	-m	puellam	servum	civem	spiritum	diem
with	v̄	puellā	servō	civĕ	spiritū	diē
for	-i	puellae		civi	spiritui	diei
of	-i or -s	puellae	servi	civis	spiritus	diei

plural		-a	-o	-e,-i,ϕ	-u	-e
subj	-i or v̄s	puellae	servi	civēs	spiritūs	diēs
obj	v̄s	puellās	servōs	civēs	spiritūs	diēs
with	-is or -bus	puellis	servis	civibus	spiritibus	diebus
for						
of	-rum or -um	puellarum	servorum	civium	spirituum	dierum

3 Adjectives

Adjectives have the same pattern as nouns but have fewer forms, just -a (feminine), -o (masculine), e,i,ϕ (either). Adjectives must match the nouns they go with in gender and case. e.g. **bonus poeta**, **bonum poetam**, etc. The -a types are used with feminine nouns, the -o types with masculine or neuter nouns, and the -e,-i,-ϕ types for all three genders.

4 Word order

Word order is not arbitrary in Latin. In general the most important elements of a sentence are placed first and most importantly last.

The expected order is: subject object .... verb. Any variation from this order places emphasis on the displaced word.

For example

> **miles hostem gladio necavit**. The soldier killed his enemy with a sword
> **gladio miles hostem necavit**. It was a sword that the soldier used to kill his enemy
> **miles gladio necavit hostem.** It was his enemy that the soldier killed with a sword
> **hostem gladio necavit miles**. It was the soldier who killed the enemy with a sword.

5 Pronunciation

Latin is pronounced mostly as it is written. But be aware that

- c and g have a hard and soft pronunciation.

  - Hard before back vowels (a, o, u). **cadit** is pronounced /kadit/. **gaudet** is pronounced /gaudet/.
  - Soft before front vowels (i, e). **cedit** is pronounced /chaydit/. **gestus** /djestus/.
  - Remember -ae is pronounced e and is therefore a front vowel. **Caesar** is pronounced /chaysar/.

- v is pronounced v (and not w). Caesar said **veni, vidi, vici** as in the song (not wayny, weedy, weaky).

- -gn- is pronounced /ny/ rather than -gn. **dignus**=worthy is pronounced /deenyoos/

- -tio in words like **oratione** = with speech is pronounced /tsio/.

- s is alway hissed (not buzzed)

Despite what the books say, by the time Rome had established provinces in Iberia and Gallia (modern Portugal, Spain, and France) these were the norm. All the Romance languages soften the c and g before front vowels as do English borrowings from Latin. e.g. Zaragossa is the Spanish for CaesarAugustus.

The reason for the change is physiological. Front vowels drag the point of articulation toward the teeth.

The evolution of, for example, ci, was ki -> kyi -> tyi -> tj- or tsi. Similarly gi became gyi, dyi, dji.

6 Prefixes

Latin was a highly successful language lasting more than 2000 years and surviving through great leaps forward in science, engineering and the arts partly because of its ability to create new words by prefixing root words. e.g. **servare** and **conservare** (keep and keep together). It pays to learn the prefixes. They are used very consistently (in contrast to Greek say):

Prefix	Meaning	Example
a(b(s))-	away	aberrat = wanders away
ad-	near	adventus=coming near
circum-	around	circumstant=stand around
com-	together	conflatus=blown together
de-	down	deflatus=blown down
dis-	apart	dissectus=cut apart
e(x)-	out	efflatus=blown out
in-	in(to) or not	injectus=thrown in, insanus=not healthy
ob-	against	objectus=thrown against
prae- or pre-	in front, before	praedictus=said before
pro-	forward	projectus=thrown forward
re-	back	rejectus=thrown back
sub-	up	sufflatus=blown up,
trans-	across	transportat=carries across

Note that closed syllables often alliterate. e.g.

- com+locare -> **collocare**=to place together, com+ductus -> **conductus**

- ex+fluit -> **effluit**=flows out

- sub+flare=**sufflare**=to blow up (Fr souffler).

Note that sub- means up, not under. (Submarine is not a Latin word!). As a preposition, sub does mean below e.g. **sub rosa**=below the rose. Why the difference? Think of the prefix as implying movement from under (hence: up).

7   Verbs

Traditional grammars tabulate verbs into

- 4 conjugations (for stems ending in -a, -e, -e,i,ϕ or i)

- 3 persons singular (I, you, he) and 3 persons plural(we,you,they),

- 3 tenses (present, past, and future),

- 3 moods (indicative, subjunctive, imperative),

- 2 aspects(perfect, imperfect)

- 2 voices (active, passive)

making 864 separate endings to learn! Don't bother.

Get by with the following:

- -t (singular) and -nt (plural). This is for 3rd person (he or they)e.g. **miles currit**, **milites currunt**. Caesar wrote the whole on his Gallic war about his own exploits in the 3rd person. **Caesar pontem trans Rhodanum jecit**. (Caesar threw a bridge across the Rhone).

- -bat(singular) and bant (plural). Imperfact = was ...ing, were ...ing

- -bit (singular) or -bunt (plural). Future = will ...

- -verat (singular or -verant (plural) = Had ...ed

- -verit (singular) or -verunt (plural) = Will have ...ed

- -tur (singular) and -ntur (plural) passive is ...ed, are ...ed

Pretty simple eh? But there are three flies in the ointment: perfect aspect, subjunctive mood, and future. You can't avoid the perfect; Caesar threw his bridges across the Rhine using the perfect aspect quid vide.

7.1   Perfect Aspect

The Perfect aspect originally meant completed e.g. **aedificavit** (has built). There had also been a simple past tense (called preterite) . The distinction was lost early in Latin's development and **aedificavit** now serves ambiguously as either has built or built. To make matters worse, there is no reliable systematic pattern for the stem of the verb. Mostly a -u- or -v- is inserted before the ending, but many verbs use an -s- (from the extinct preterite form) instead, and others change the vowel. Examples:

- **amat** = he loves, **amavit** = he has loved or he loved

- **debet** = he owes, **debuit** = he has owed, or he owed

- **regit** = he rules, **rexit** = he has ruled or he ruled

- **audit** = he hears, **audivit** = he has heard or he heard

- **jacit**=he throws, **jecit**=he has thrown. (Frequently done by Caesar to bridges across rivers)

When reading, assume the simple past meaning (**rexit**=he ruled) rather than the perfect (he has ruled) unless the context implies otherwise. The confusion caused by all of the above resulted in Latin adopting the periphrastic construction **habet aedificatum** to mean has built. This is form now used by all the Romance languages. You will see it occasionally in classical Latin.

7.2   Subjunctive

Subjunctive literally means *joined-up* and was used for subordinate clauses e.g. **mihi dixit qui esset dives** = He told me who was the rich one. Expect a subjunctive whenever you see a clause introduced by ut, qui, quod, ubi, cum, etc. If a subjunctive occurs anywhere else assume it means may (present) or might (past) (traditionally expressing wish, command, doubt, or denial).

Recognise the following as subjunctive:

- -ret or -rent = may ... The infinitive + verb ending. Note **esset** and **essent** = might be.

- -a(vi)sset or a(vi)ssent = might have. **fuisset** and **fuissent** (might have been)

The present subjunctive is conjugated as follows:

- -a type verbs replace the -a with -e. e.g. **amat** -> **amet** (may he love, or he may love)

- The others acquire -a. e.g. **debet** -> **debeat** (let him owe), **regit** -> **regat** (may he rule, or he may rule), **audit** -> **audiat** (let him hear).

7.3   Persons

For the record, the complete set of person endings is (Note the perfect aspect has different endings).

Person	Ending	Passive	Command	Perfect
1: I	-o or -m	-or		-i
2: You	-s	-ris	remove the -s	-isti
3: He	-t	-tur		-t
1:We	-mus	-mur		-imus
2:You	-tis	-mini	-te	-istis
3:They	-nt	-ntur		-erunt

7.4   Future

The simple future tense has 2 forms:

- -a and -e types have -bit and -bunt, e.g. **amabit**=he will love and **debebit**=he will owe

- -e,-i,ϕ and -i types have -et and -ent, e.g. **reget**=he will rule and **audiet**=he will hear. (but **ego regam** and **ego audiam**).

In common speech a new periphrastic construction of -re (infinitive) followed by the appropriate form for habere=have. e.g. **amare habet** = he will love (cf French aimera) was used for the future tense. You may see this in later Latin texts.

7.5   Exceptions

All languages have irregular verbs (verbs which do not conform to normal patterns). They survive usually because they are very frequently used. Words such as be, go, have, etc.

You need to learn the verbs **esse** = to be and **ire**=to go in all their guises.

	Means	Present	Future	Imperfect	Perfect	Subjunctive
esse	be	est, sunt	ero, erunt	erat, erant	fuit, fuerunt	sim, sint
ire	go	it, eunt	ibit, ibunt	iebat, iebant	i(v)it, i(v)erunt	eat, eant
ferre	bear	fert, ferunt	fer	ferrebat, ferrebant	tulit, tulerunt	ferat, ferant

7.6   Participles

Verb stems have endings which mean -ing. They can be adjectives or nouns (gerunds).

Participles are sparse (not all tenses and voices have them). For example there is

- *…ing* but no *being …ed*

- *about to …* but no *about to be …ed*

- *having been …ed* but no *having …ed*

Tense	Ending	Meaning	Example
present	-ens, -entem, -ente, etc	…-ing	**luna fulgente**,= with the moon shining,
	-endus, -endum, -endo, etc	needing to be ...ex	**haec legenda**=these things needing to be read
future	-tur-	about to ...	**morituri Caesarem salutant**= about to die they salute Caesar
past	-tus, -tum, -to, etc	having been...ed	**his dictis**=with these things having been said

7.7   Verbal Nouns

Gerunds are -ing nouns and are neuter. They have the form -endum, -endum, -endo. You cannot distinguish them from gerundives which are ing adjectives except by context. The infinitive form is also a verbal noun.

Examples

Verbal Noun	Meaning	Example
legendum	reading	**legendo discunt**=with reading they learn
laborare	to work	**laborare est orare**= to work is to pray