

Some thoughts on writing the *Latin in Action* grammar sheets

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Cressida Ryan is currently pursuing a PhD at Nottingham, following a change of career from teaching classics in schools. While she is currently teaching languages in both the Classics and Theology Departments at Nottingham, the grammar sheets she has produced for *Latin in Action* make use of her school-teaching experience, particularly recent 'bite size' grammatical assistance given to students at GCSE level.

Operating Criteria (self-imposed and external)

1. The grammatical material had to be linked to the exercises but have the potential to stand alone.
2. The grammatical material should be sufficient for the exercises – not a fully comprehensive grammar book.
3. The target audience are first year *ab initio* undergraduates:
 - No linguistic background can be assumed.
 - English grammar needs to be explained before Latin grammar can be tackled.
 - Technical grammatical terms need to be explained as well as used.
4. As many supplementary exercises and examples as possible are desirable.
5. These grammar sheets need to work primarily in an online environment, their use in printed format is secondary.
6. The assignments should not be included in the grammatical material or marked up for links, so that they can still be used for assessment purposes.

Creating Online Grammar Sheets

Providing 'on demand' grammatical support in response to student need linked to particular exercises and texts makes these grammar sheets very different from a grammar book. First, is no conventional Index or Contents (although all the sheets have titles which appear all together on the right hand side of the screen). This is mainly because the exercises, being drawn from real Latin, do not introduce accident and syntax in any systematic way, so it is impossible to predict which links a student will choose to follow or need most help with.

Indeed, no grammatical support material is ever going to be used systematically; instead students will dip in and out as they need help. The advantage of the web-based *Latin in Action* is that such help is immediately clear (due to the visual marker of [linked text](#) – NB not a 'real' link, just colour and underlining!), as is its previous use by a student ([linked text](#) signifying that the student has looked this up before, so should consider learning/revising it), and just a click away, but that click has to be made – it requires an active decision to access it. Having such help 'just a click away' is advantageous at *ab initio* level where both confidence and knowledge can be low and where the accessibility (in terms of speed and ease of finding it) of relevant grammatical assistance can positively affect engagement with it and the text that instigated it. I do not deny that knowing your way round your preferred grammar

book is invaluable in the long term, but if the aim at *ab initio* level is to introduce high level translation and comment skills removing practical barriers to learning how the language works – like learning your way round a grammar book or needing to know the technical name for a construction before you can look it up in the grammar book at all – is advantageous. The use of correct grammatical terms enables the transition to a grammar book to be made later.

The particular ‘on demand’ use of grammatical assistance when combined with the non-systematic introduction of accident and syntax in *Latin in Action* means that each grammar sheet needs to be almost entirely self-explanatory. I have achieved this, even where this means repeating basic material, by careful writing and by embedding extensive links to other grammar sheets.

The undeniable advantage of the online format for grammatical assistance is the possibility of immediate, ‘click here’ cross-referencing through hyperlinked text. This capability meant that links could be made between sheets for continuation or comparison purposes, for example, direct and indirect constructions are separated but links between them are provided.

By the end of the process of identifying the particular grammatical support needed for the *Latin in Action* exercises there were 51 grammar sheets in total of varying lengths, despite careful consideration of the balance between number of different sheets and the amount on each. Where the nature of a construction pointed towards a long sheet it was often possible to separate elements out into other sheets – for example, ‘Oblique Case Usage’ quickly became very extended, so I removed some uses that were irrelevant for the purposes of the exercises and extracted others to other sheets in their own right (e.g. prepositions and case usages).

While the ideal was to provide ‘at a glance’ reference, there is a distinct difference between A4 ‘at a glance’ and web-based ‘at a glance’. The optimum size on the web is one screen – i.e. one that does not scroll – and bearing this in mind from the beginning was helpful in structuring the longer sheets so that they could be downloaded or printed off whole but broken down into smaller packages for online viewing, so that the student doesn’t have to scroll down too far.

Linking the Grammar Sheets with the Exercises

In marking up the exercises to connect to the grammar sheets, examples of different features have not been all or indiscriminately linked to the appropriate grammar sheet. I made the decision for my help not to be so ‘helpful’ that the student could not survive without it because there was no impulse to learn these survival skills for themselves. For this reason, I have adopted several strategies to support the student towards becoming an autonomous learner and I have assumed the student to be capable of some intelligent guesswork – which is in keeping with the general approach of the exercises, which encourage this skill.

- Repeated examples in close proximity to a linked example are left unexplained/unlinked; this provides an opportunity for the student to practice/learn to recognize a particular grammatical feature.

- Increasingly few examples are linked, so that as the student progresses through the exercises less support is offered and more is expected of them.
- No example has been linked to more than one sheet, so where a word or phrase provides a grammatical example which falls under the remit of multiple grammar sheet, I have chosen the sheet which is most helpful in the context.

Coverage: the Grammar Sheets and their Examples

The particular examples chosen to feature as illustrations and exercises on the grammar sheets are, wherever possible, not the ones which lead the student to the grammar sheet (by means of links from the exercises) in the first place. However, this was not always possible, given the small number of times some constructions occur.

Grammatical

The necessity for the grammar sheets to closely correlate to the content of the *Latin in Action* exercises means that there are 'gaps' in the grammar sheets, most notably indirect questions. Such gaps are indicative of the coverage afforded by the course as conceived by Susanna Phillippo and identifying these highlights the areas that students will still need to cover on completing that course. At Newcastle, this first-year course is part of an on-going programme of language provision, so the opportunity to fill these 'gaps' occurs in the second year.

For those considering using the *Latin in Action* materials themselves there are two advantages:

- 1) identifying crucial 'gaps' in the grammatical provision in relation to your own teaching aims and objectives will enable you to choose supplementary or alternative Latin passages for exercises based on this pedagogical model.
- 2) areas of grammar that are covered will yield exercises and examples to supplement other teaching that does not use this pedagogical model.

Linguistic and Genre Registers

The exercises cover an admirably broad range of Latin authors and periods, so I thought it particularly important for the internalisation of grammatical constructions that further examples should come from a consistent source (wherever possible). I chose Cicero as a focus author for the examples in the grammar sheets because not only is Republican Latin commonly met by students at intermediate level, with Cicero a frequent chosen author, but Ciceronian Latin also provides a conscious model for later writers.

Ciceronian examples, because of Cicero's stylistic variation, have the potential to provide students with a good range of reading experience. Hence I have included examples from defence speeches, prosecution speeches and the letters, as well as a limited number of philosophical examples (particularly from *De Senectute*). I limited the number of these examples because Cicero partly created the philosophical language in which he wrote, which makes it less accessible to beginners, who would then also have to grapple with the content and vocabulary, as well as the grammar.

In choosing examples from Cicero, the relationship between type of text and linguistic features displayed became increasingly obvious and may be of further pedagogic interest in constructing teaching materials in the future. Cicero's long sentences often proved problematic and so fragments were extracted to demonstrate particular grammatical points. Features such as second-person verbs and imperatives, for example, were most easily found at the start of speeches, or in letters.

Metrical Matters

The grammar sheets do not cover some of the interesting non-grammatical aspects of Latin, such as scansion and its effect on word order. Supplementary materials on this aspect have been provided by Susannah Phillippo as part of the Texts Transformed project, which uses this online format, but they are not available in *Latin in Action* – if you feel this is an important omission, do let the HCA Subject Centre know (email classics.csc@durham.ac.uk).

English into Latin

Some of the grammar sheets include exercises and some of these have some English into Latin. Particularly given concerns over the level of English grammatical competence of students, I felt that some degree of composition would be helpful. It is only ever targeted and fragmentary and does not form a significant part of the sheets. It could be ignored. If you are interested in a technique which uses English into Latin and translation comparison (of the student's Latin version with the original author's Latin – the English for translation into Latin being itself a translation out of Latin) at *ab initio* level, take a look at the *Leeds Latin Project* through the HCA website (www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/classics/resources).

Vocabulary

No vocabulary is given. The aim of the *Latin in Action* exercises is not to teach vocabulary and the support sheets reflect this. It was assumed that students would have access to dictionaries. Tutors thinking of reusing the materials may find that a supplementary sheet on how to use a dictionary effectively is useful at *ab initio* level (this was covered in-class at Newcastle), although it would be useful at all levels because of the pre-university exam board tendency towards vocabulary lists that accompany particular passages, obviating the need to decide between different words formed from the same stem.