

Grammar: the ablative case

Overview

The ablative in Latin carries the basic meaning of 'by, with, from'. This basic use can be divided into a range of specific uses. The easiest way to understand the different uses of the ablative can be to imagine the question which any statement using the ablative can be conceived as answering.

For the endings see the pages on individual declensions:

1st declension nouns

2nd declension nouns

3rd declension nouns

4th declension nouns

5th declension nouns

The ablative of means

This answers the question '*With what* did you do that?', telling you the means by which or instrument with which an action is done,

The master beats his slave with a book

which in Latin would be:

dominus servum pulsat libro.

This use of the ablative also expresses the agent of a passive verb when the agent is a thing and not a person,

The house was destroyed by fire

which in Latin would be:

domus igne deletus est

The ablative of personal agent

If you want a person to be the agent of a passive verb, then

the preposition *a, ab* is needed,

Caesar was killed by Brutus

which in Latin would be:

Caesar a Bruto necatus est.

Ablative of accompaniment

This is used of people to answer the question 'with whom do you do that?'. The preposition *cum* is needed.

Maecenas walks to the forum with Catullus.

which in Latin would be:

Maecenas ad forum cum Catullo ambulat.

The ablative of manner

This answers the question 'How did you do that?', telling you the way in which an action is done.

He eats with speed

which in Latin would be:

edit cum celeritate

which could also be translated adverbially:

He eats quickly.

The preposition will only be used when there is no adjective qualifying the noun. It is not otherwise required, but may be used.

edit magna (cum) celeritate

He eats with great speed / very quickly.

The ablative of comparison

Latin expresses comparison in two ways. One way is to put the second item in the comparison into the ablative (regardless of

the case of the first item).

Nero's golden house was bigger than a temple
which in Latin would be:

domus aurea Neronis maior templo erat.

Note that this use of the ablative is easily spotted due the presence of a comparative adjective or adverb. An adverbial example would be:

The commander reached camp more quickly than the enemy
which in Latin would be:

imperator ad castra inimico celerius venit.

See the separate page on *Comparison* for more information about the forms of the words.

The ablative of description

This gives you further information about something.

The teacher of great learning teaches the boys
which in Latin would be:

magister magno docendo pueros discit

The ablative of degree of difference

In such cases, the ablative is also used to explain the degree to which two things differ from each other.

Nero's golden house was bigger than a temple by far
which in Latin would be:

domus aurea Neronis magno maior templo erat.

This can also be translated as:

Nero's golden house was much bigger than a temple.

The ablative of price

This answers the question 'How much was that?'.
The slave buys food for ten denarii.

which in Latin would be:

which in Latin would be:

servus cibum decem denariis emit.

The ablative of time when and within which

This answers the question 'When is x happening?'.
On the third day you will see land.

which in Latin would be:

which in Latin would be:

tertio die terram videbis.

or

He built the house in ten days.

which in Latin would be:

domum decem diebus aedificavit.

Note that with numbers, the cardinal expresses the time *within which* something is done, but the ordinal number expresses the point *at which / time when* something is done.

The ablative of origin

This tells you the source, origin or descent of something. A preposition such as *a, ab, e, ex* can be used, but is not necessary.

Nero is the son of Agrippina

which in Latin would be:

Nero (ex) Agrippina natus est.

Note that in English we express this using a *genitive* and not an *ablative*.

The ablative with certain adjectives

The ablative is used regularly to denote the object of certain adjectives, such as:

fretus	relying upon
dignus	worthy

The master is worthy of honour
which in Latin would be:

dominus dignus honore est

This can also be translated as:

The master deserves honour

Note that in English we express this construction with a *genitive* and not an *ablative*.

The ablative with certain verbs

A small group of verbs regularly take an ablative object. These include:

the active verb	careo
the deponent verbs	utor, fungor, fruor, potior, vescor
the impersonal verb	opus est

The master enjoys much leisure time
which in Latin would be:

dominus multo otio fruitur

or

There is need of food here
which in Latin would be:

hic cibo opus est.

Ablative absolutes

The ablative absolute is a common construction in Latin. It consists of a noun, pronoun or adjective in the ablative, and a participle in the ablative. It gives you further information about the circumstances in which something happens. As an absolute construction, the subject of the absolute is not the same as the subject of the main sentence.

The easiest way to think through the ablative absolute is to think through it literally and then transfer it into good English.

The present participle tells you about something that happens at the same time as the main verb.

oratore dicente, iudex dormit

Lit. with the orator speaking, the judge sleeps

which better translates as:

While the orator speaks, the judge sleeps

or

As the orator speaks, the judge sleeps.

It need not accompany a present main verb though:

oratore dicente, iudex dormivit

Lit. with the orator speaking, the judge slept.

which better translates as:

While the orator was speaking, the judge slept.

Note that English also uses two different tenses here, but not the same two.

The perfect participle tells you about something that happens before the action of the main verb.

proelio finito, milites dormiunt

Lit. With the battle having been finished, the soldiers sleep

which better translates as:

When the battle had finished, the soldiers slept

or

After the battle had finished, the soldiers slept.

Examples drawn from the exercises

Identify the use of the ablative in each sentence. Translate.

The number after each question indicates the exercise from which it has been drawn, so that you can look at the example in context.

1. scandit fatalis machina muros feta armis. *Exercise 1*
2. nuptialia concinens uoce carmina tinnula ... *Exercise 4*
3. manu pineam quate taedam. *Exercise 4*
4. quanta illum toto versant suspiria lecto. *Exercise 6*
5. notat et designat oculis ... *Exercise 7*
6. sed iam me ipse inertiae nequitiaeque condemno. *Exercise 7*
7. Amor sinistra ut ante dextra sternuit approbationem. *Exercise 8*
8. illo purpureo ore suauitata, 'sic,' inquit ... *Exercise 8*
9. Hoc mortuo, aut si qui ex reliquis excellit dignitate succedit, aut si sunt plures pares, suffragio druidum, nonnumquam etiam armis de principatu contendunt. *Exercise 11*
10. Murus instructus laterculo coctili, bitumine interlito ... *Exercise 10*

Further ablative examples

Identify where an ablative would be used to translate the following, and how it is being used:

1. Cicero was friends with many great men who thought that he was worthy of great honour.
2. Brutus killed Caesar with a sword in his right hand, along with other traitors.
3. When the messenger had descended from his horse, the commander asked him for the message he had brought from the battle.
4. The soldiers advanced by night.
5. The men ate with their fingers.
6. A man with one eye came out of the sea and surprised everyone on the shore.
7. In the book it was written carefully by the poet that there would be many more Romans than stars.
8. The senator lacked money because he bought a house for much gold.
9. The river was crossed by Caesar on the tenth day.
10. Cool water flowed from the underground spring.