

PROSE COMPOSITION IN INTERMEDIATE LATIN:
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Teaching Latin prose composition has provoked considerable argument. Recent critics have claimed that the practice is artificial since Latin has no living native speakers, that it does not help students read better, that it is elitist and intimidating, especially for less advanced students, that it tests too many items at once, and that it unrealistically implies that students can and should emulate a particular ancient author.

Defenders, with whom I am in sympathy, counter that students' sensitivity to Latin vocabulary and syntax as well as idiom and rhetoric increases with active use, and that composition can help compensate for the omission of oral conversations in many Latin curricula. It is up to us to find better ways of teaching composition, without intimidating our students, testing too many new items simultaneously, or professing to clone Cicero.

This essay describes projects which were designed for second- or third-semester college classes but can be adapted to many situations. These assignments are not adequate for prose composition classes *per se* but have proved to be motivating both for enthusiastic students and for those who are proceeding reluctantly through Loyola's four-semester language requirement. In my fifteen years of teaching our elementary-intermediate sequence, the most challenging course has been second-semester Latin in the fall. Freshmen who have mastered part but not all of diverse high school curricula, taught by different teachers with varying emphases, are mixed with a few sophomores who failed second-semester Latin in the spring. Students from high schools where Latin is unavailable to seniors face particular challenges. Nowhere is the diversity in this group more apparent than in composition. Wheelock's English-to-Latin sentences present numerous challenges to students inexperienced in writing

Latin.¹ Moreover, if such a student writes an exercise full of mistakes Saturday, hands it in Monday, receives corrections Wednesday, and comes to office hours Friday, these mistakes can solidify for a week.

Therefore, in teaching students who take the second semester in the fall and the third in the spring, I work to minimize the likely number of errors, without requiring us all to return to Chapter One. First, I have students take Latin-to-English sentences which we have translated in class and change the number, substitute different vocabulary items, etc. These standard transformation exercises will be familiar to most readers.

Next, I create an assignment which provides a helpful transition to connected prose composition. Although I regularly emphasize that learning vocabulary is only part of learning a language, many students do not internalize this notion until completing my "time travel project." For this assignment, students write as intelligent but not infallible ancient Romans learning English in contemporary Baltimore. Each student composes an English paragraph with five or six distinct mistakes of the sort a native Latin speaker might make. These can include either ungrammatical phrases or grammatical but very awkward phrases. Errors not attributable to specific characteristics of Latin (e.g. "gooses" for "geese") do not count, nor do vocabulary errors. Each mistake is accompanied by a note which gives both the correct English and the rule of Latin grammar or idiom which misled the time traveler. For example, the Roman might use an infinitive in English reported speech, omit an article, confuse the simple present with the present progressive, or place a verb after the direct object.

The following excerpts come from spring 1998 students: "I am spending the day in Baltimore at Camden Yards in order that I may see a baseball game. I heard it to be fun to be there. I will be happy if they will win the game" (Raina Ferreri). "I by boat to Baltimore

¹ I originated the assignments described here while using the fourth edition of F. M. Wheelock, *Latin: An Introductory Course Based on Ancient Authors* (New York 1992). More helpful exercises appear in the fifth edition, *Wheelock's Latin*, rev. R. A. LaFleur (New York 1995; sixth edition forthcoming 2000); D. A. Grote, *Comprehensive Study Guide for Wheelock's Latin* (Lanham, MD 1995); and P. T. Comeau and LaFleur, *Workbook for Wheelock's Latin* (New York 1997). Additional suggestions for brief exercises in active Latin on the basis of Wheelock's readings are offered by C. W. Wooten, III, *The New Edition of Wheelock's Latin* (1996) 188-189.

came ... We benefited ourselves by means of a taxi ... With Baltimore having been seen, I prepared to go home" (Brian Zeigler). "When I come Baltimore ... many people in the streets I see. It is necessary to walk great with care ... We don't have much of time ... I want to tell three out of my friends about Baltimore. I do very great thanks to you" (Robert Van Vorst).²

Obviously one can vary the length of this assignment, the weight given to cultural content, and so on. With a weak class, one might give hints in advance. For example, when presenting indirect discourse one might suggest misusing an infinitive in the upcoming time travel assignment. The middle school or high school teacher might want to have students, working individually or in groups, compose a "wrong" English sentence at the end of every chapter, rather than have each student try to develop a sense of contrastive grammar over weeks or months.

In my experience, many students, including some with C averages, produce amusing paragraphs which exactly satisfy the assignment. Others must be led to discover, by means of leading questions, that a Roman might see no reason to insert *the*—not, as some students state, that the time traveler would "assume" the word *the*. "I never thought about that before!" exclaimed one such student. But "thinking about it" is exactly what we all labor to encourage. Furthermore, in an era when many Americans sing the praises of multiculturalism while remaining stubbornly monolingual, it is our duty to insure that our students, especially those who plan never again to grapple with a second language, spend time in the shoes of those who have no choice about confronting the challenges of English.

I turn now to the composition itself, for which these other exercises are preparation. For this project, I assign to each student a paragraph of prose which we have read in Wheelock or Groton and May.³ The student is instructed to work from the designated passage in some way, often re-writing it from a different point of view. For example, a student could review Groton and May's Chapter 19

² The explanations for the writers' "mistakes" will be obvious to Latinists and have been omitted here.

³ A. H. Groton and J. M. May, *Thirty-eight Latin Stories Designed to Accompany Wheelock's Latin*⁵ (Wauconda, IL 1998), includes copious notes for beginning students. Further help for these stories can be found in *Language Now!*, instructional software to assist in reading Latin (and other languages) from Transparent Language, Inc. (www.transparent.com).

(p. 34) on the Judgment of Paris and then write as Paris, explaining why he chose Venus. Thus, the student should not be tempted to look up quantities of words or to invent many idioms. We have all read sentences from students who apparently made copious use of a lexicon, untroubled by issues of case, much less by anxieties about whether the English word *that*, for example, might serve several distinct functions. My composition assignment, preceded by work focusing on differences between Latin and English, based on a passage which should supply some useful diction, and limited in its first draft to very simple Latin, does not eliminate such mistakes, but it does aim to minimize their number.

Details vary from semester to semester, but the project works roughly as follows. Each student produces three or four drafts. The first consists of seven or eight sentences, each beginning with the subject and ending with an indicative verb. Usually I require at least one third-declension word not in the nominative, and one third-conjugation verb not in the first person nor any present indicative, so that students do not use only the easiest forms. When this draft has been corrected, students are given a list of “sophisticated” constructions and techniques, of which they must incorporate at least three, including one participle and one subjunctive subordinate clause, into their second draft.⁴ This usually contains about six slightly more elegant sentences instead of eight very simple sentences. In the third and/or fourth drafts, students play with word order for emphasis, insert transitions (*igitur*, relative pronouns, etc.), and add some rhetorical flourishes. Most of these are modeled on excerpts from Cicero’s First Catilinarian, which we examine in class.⁵ Even relatively unsophisticated students can appreciate varied sentence

⁴ The handout I give my students focuses on the topic of love, since we have generally looked at a few lines of Catullus, and illustrates ways to elaborate on, e.g., *Puella me (non) amat*. I include effective word order (*Puella me amat candida*), varied vocabulary (*amo/diligo/excrucior*), variety of tenses (*Tum volebat sed nunc iam illa non vult*), complementary infinitives (*Me amare videtur*), gerundives (*Amandus sum*), imperatives and independent subjunctives (*Me amet*), jussive clauses (*Impero ut me ames*), adverbs and adverbial phrases (*magno cum amore*), relatives (*Puella quam amo ...*), participles (*Puella amata me odit*), causal /concessive /temporal clauses (*Cum puellam diligam*), indirect statement (*Omnes dicunt me amare te*), indirect question (*Nescio cur te amem*), purpose expressions (*Hoc feci ut puellae persuaderem, persuadendi causa*, etc.), result clauses (*Hanc adeo diligo ut nemo intellegere possit*), conditionals (*Si me amet, beatissimus sim*), etc.

⁵ Especially useful are the first two paragraphs with notes in Wheelock³ (above, n. 1) 299-300.

length, rhetorical questions, sarcasm, anaphora, and so forth. Many students come to my office for help with revisions, and most make gratifying improvements.

For example, in spring 1998 Abigail Williams, working from and refuting Ov. *Met.* 15.153-216 as paraphrased in Wheelock, began with such sentences as: *Ille [Pythagoras] de morte erravit. Mors non est levis.* Her third draft incorporated a hortatory subjunctive, indirect statement, apostrophe, a rhetorical question, and experiments with word order: *Credamus erravisse illum de morte. Audesne dicere levem esse mortem?* Patrick Peach, writing as Narcissus on the basis of Groton and May, began *Nympha Echo diu me amaverat. Echo amorem mihi numquam dicere potuerat.* Later he introduced changes in tense, an additional complementary infinitive, a relative clause, and an adversative conjunction: *Nympha Echo me diu amare videbatur, quae autem amorem mihi numquam dicere poterat.* He also combined *Dehinc imaginem meam vidi. Magno amore mei superatus sum* into a single sentence by means of an ablative absolute: *Imagine visa ...* Diana Higgins, working with Plin. *Epist.* 2.2 as adapted by Groton and May, ultimately expressed a request for a letter as follows: *Si me scribas, sim beatissimus.*⁶

Obviously I am not cloning Cicero, although I was delighted to have one student use (unprompted!) *quae cum ita sint* and another use *quo usque tandem* in new but appropriate contexts; I encourage students to borrow freely from any classical author. Nor am I producing ideal students with active command of all so-called sophisticated constructions, since each student is asked to choose just a few. Nonetheless, this assignment, born from a need to compromise, enhances awareness of selected constructions as resources rather than obstacles, and of differences between English and Latin idiom, without testing too many items on any one draft. Finally, those students who come to office hours and observe that I too occasionally double-check in the *OLD* whether Cicero prefers a dative or a preposition with a particular verb do not feel, I trust, that they are being intimidated by an "elitist."

A few practicalities: I announce that each draft counts toward their final grade. Otherwise, a few students may hand in a first draft full of random forms and expect me to re-write it. I have students triple-space each draft, to allow for legible comments, and include an English translation. I also ask students to hand in the previous,

⁶ Wheelock (above, n. 1) 120-121; Groton and May (above, n. 3) 22.

corrected draft with each subsequent draft. This ensures that students have incorporated my suggestions in their new draft, and that they do not lose points if one of my corrections was unclear. With respect to cultural inaccuracies, if a student could not reasonably be expected to know better, I write comments but do not deduct points.

Finally, this assignment can be varied almost infinitely: in the length, the number of drafts, the level of grammatical difficulty, and so on. Students can be given class time to double-check each other's subject-verb agreement on the first draft. Individual conferences with the instructor can be required or optional. Students can be invited to introduce modern values, as long as they are aware that they are writing anachronistically. One can assign easier paragraphs to less talented students, or allow students to choose topics. My individualized assignments are usually based on whatever brief passage each student has chosen to memorize (another course requirement). Secondary school students, after covering several chapters of (e.g.) *Latin for Americans*,⁷ could be invited to vote on their favorite passage read to date; the class then could work together to re-write that passage over the next month, adding new constructions from each chapter.

In conclusion, these projects allow each student to experience "hands-on" the differences between Latin and English syntax and idiom, in the context of topics apparently of interest to that student. Moreover, these assignments, if kept short, are relatively entertaining to grade, and some otherwise undistinguished students produce surprisingly clever work.⁸

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⁷ B. L. Ullman et al., *Latin for Americans*² (Mission Hills, CA 1999).

⁸ I am grateful to the anonymous referees of *CJ* for their help; to my audiences at the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, April 1998, and at Loyola College's Latin Seminar for teachers, October 1999, for their reactions; and to my students at Loyola, for allowing their work to be shared.