

"Dear Student...": Teaching Roman Letters in the Age of Email  
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Recently, in my undergraduate syllabi I have included a section entitled "Email Etiquette," which outlines my expectations for proper correspondence via email, including appropriate salutations and valedictions, subject headings, language, and other basic guidelines. In this age of email, text messaging, Facebook, and Myspace such details become increasingly necessary. Is the decline of etiquette a sign that the written letter as a genre is becoming a lost art?

The idea that it might be makes teaching an undergraduate course on Roman epistolary literature that much more dynamic. Not only do ancient letters offer valuable insight into Roman life, but they provide an excellent springboard for larger discussions on the place of "the letter" in modern society. This paper explores the utility and methodology of teaching a course in translation on Roman letters. Based on my own experience teaching the course several times, I present my pedagogical approach, including organization of the material (chronological and topical), types of assignments, and methods of assessment. On a basic level, the course is useful in disseminating information about ancient Roman life, familiarizing students with a broad range of authors (e.g., Cicero, Horace, Pliny, Statius, Ausonius) and content (e.g., politics, death, art and architecture). On a deeper level, the course material can be used to explore deeper issues of literary genre and style (the prose letter versus the verse letter; "real" versus "fictional" letters), theory (e.g., narratology), and thematic topics (e.g., the pursuit of fame, gender roles).

On a practical side, the course can also be used for skills-based learning: students hone their critical analysis, writing, and communication skills through specific assignments and regular discussion. Short weekly paper assignments, for example, require students to compare and contrast an ancient letter (e.g., Cicero, Ovid) with a modern one (e.g., Andrew Jackson, Emily Dickenson), using specific examples to flesh out thematic or stylistic comparison. As an added benefit, then, students are actively making a connection between ancient and modern, and are encouraged to consider their own modern context of letter-writing in light of ancient Roman society. They ultimately must consider the role and definition of the letter today as a literary genre: is the hand-written letter in fact a dead art or has it simply been replaced by a new form, the electronic letter? How does electronic communication affect the rhetoric, style, and composition of the letter? How has this modern technology changed our view of hand-written letters (are they more special, novel, silly) and our purchase of paper stationery?

The paper reveals that such a course not only benefits majors, but students from all disciplines who can profit from the skills exercised in analyzing the ancient texts. Moreover, the course fits easily into the curriculum of a small classics department, not just those at larger institutions, meeting the needs of the program and students alike.