

## Handle with Care: Working with Original Manuscripts and Early Printed Editions

One of the goals of our elementary Latin program is to involve students in activities beyond the textbook that combine language, culture, and history in new ways. This presentation describes one of the projects we have developed to that end. Students who have almost completed the first semester of Latin visit our library's Special Collections department to learn how Latin texts circulated in both manuscript and print form during the late medieval and early modern period (1300-1600) by working hands-on with original materials. Actually handling the materials (no gloves are required, just clean hands and gentle care) can be a transformative experience. For some students, this is the highlight of the semester, a time when the study of a supposedly dead language comes alive and vividly reminds them why people still learn Latin. This is also the moment when most of our students develop a more panoramic view of the Latin language and the circuitous journeys taken by the Latin texts they've been reading all semester. Sometimes they simply get a kick out of learning for the first time that our term "bookworm" is actually a metaphor derived from a real pest. In addition, the visit gets students out of their regular classroom, giving them a break from the demands of learning new forms and vocabulary and rewarding them for their hard work.

Before the visit, the instructor talks about the writing materials and books used in antiquity. Students get to handle reproductions of a stylus, wax tablets, a papyrus book roll, and a papyrus codex. In addition, a video tutorial gives students an idea of what to expect during the visit to Special Collections and why it's important, as well as information on the creation and transmission of books. Among other things, students learn about book ownership and why books were so expensive until relatively recently in history. The video tutorial concludes with a

demonstration of an online visualization tool that tracks the movement of *incunabula* (books printed before 1501 CE) over time and geographic area (<http://15cv.trade/>).

Students meet in the library's Special Collections department during the next normal class time. Due to the age of the manuscripts and books, everyone must follow the procedures outlined at the beginning of the session, including placing all personal belongings at the back of the room, having clean hands, leaving the items in their supports, handling the books carefully, and using only pencils (no pens) to take notes on the worksheets provided. Students work with a partner during the session, which is co-taught by a Latin instructor and a library staff member. Each pair of students spends 5-10 minutes examining a particular book before moving on to another. For each item, students complete a one-page worksheet that prompts them to look for specific characteristics of that book, such as foxing, manicules, marginalia, and so forth. Definitions of these special terms are given in the worksheets. Our source for book terminology is John Carter's and Nicolas Barker's seminal *ABC for Book Collectors*, now in its ninth edition (London: Oak Knoll Press, 2016). Students are encouraged to make notes and draw pictures on the worksheets or to take photos.

As a follow-up to the visit, students write a discussion board post (300-500 words) based on several open-ended prompts. Assessment is based on both participation and the discussion board post. Working with manuscripts and early printed editions continues to be one of the most significant and personally engaging units of the semester for our beginning Latin students.