

What Are We Testing? A Case for Sight-Reading Assessments  
in the Intermediate Latin Classroom

This year I had the opportunity to revise the summer intensive Latin program at my institution, which covers our beginning and intermediate courses—two years of study—in eight weeks, using an objectives-based model of syllabus design. In very simple terms, this approach works around the following questions: What should students be able to do as a result of taking this course? What kinds of assessments can gauge whether students are reaching those goals? And finally, what activities are likely to foster success in those assessments? Starting with objectives in this way can be invigorating, as it fosters creative, expansive thinking and—just as important—explicit communication about what our field, our classes, and our individual priorities can contribute to the short- and long-term development of our students, majors and non-majors alike. I expected that this first step of defining my goals would lead to the most profound changes in my organization of the material. Indeed, some important updates did come from that part of the process. Yet the greatest impact on the way I conducted my course as a consequence of designing it this way came from asking myself how we can best assess our most fundamental and traditional objective: Reading Latin.

Of course a primary goal of beginning and intermediate Latin courses is that students gain a facility at reading in the target language. What does this look like, though? When students are handed an unfamiliar text, they should be able not only to apply whatever foundational knowledge they remember—that is, familiar vocabulary and the ability to analyze syntax—but also, and perhaps more importantly, to recognize what they do not know and fill in the gaps using the common resources of our field—dictionaries, grammar references, commentaries, to start. Although this is what reading looks like to the advanced student and even to the

professional, this does not tend to be the set of skills assessed the intermediate or even advanced undergraduate level, where, at least in my experience, prepared passages dominate midterms and finals.

Who hasn't told their students, "Don't memorize a translation!" But we know that many do, or try to, and by testing our intermediate readers on prepared passages without aids, we are tempting them to do just that. Sight reading assessments remove any utility of consulting translations, either published or their own, for the sake of doing well on the test. Study time can then be spent on strengthening vocabulary and reviewing syntax, or reading for the sake of practicing reading—all activities that improve students' chances of long-term retention. This paper argues that sight exams are both possible and desirable, provides practical advice for implementing them successfully, and addresses common causes of resistance to their use as a regular or primary assessment tool.