

The Transition to Reading Latin: Structural Patterns and Cultural Language Differences

Latin students are first taught at the phrase and sentence level of grammar and syntax. When they start reading extended Latin passages, stylistic and rhetorical features are often added. Less attention is usually given, however, to the levels of “paragraph” and longer blocks of organized structural patterns of text or to the differences in writing style between Latin and English. Enabling students to figure out or providing information and practice in these aspects can help students make the transition and enhance understanding. This paper will discuss and examine examples of some of these structural patterns and their markers and the differences in writing style between Latin and English, with application to the Standards of Communication and Comparisons between languages. Exercises, activities, and ways to help students of different levels learn to recognize and identify structural markers and types and to develop appropriate expectations for reading will also be shared.

There are differences between languages in writing style, as Kaplan has noted. English is very direct and linear as compared to the Romance languages, for example, which freely allow digressions. Kaplan illustrated the difference as a straight line (English) vs. a more zig-zag (Romance languages). Latin, as will be argued, is similar to the Romance languages (or v.v.). English can also be described as a writer responsible language, with the nature of the relationship of connections expressed explicitly. Though not to the degree of the Semitic languages, which often use parallel clauses and coordinating conjunctions, etc., and let the reader interpret the relationships, Latin is more reader responsible in some constructions, such as ablative absolutes and *cum* clauses, which may express a temporal, causal, or concessive relationship.

There are also different types of expository “paragraphs,” such as narrative, description, compare/contrast, enumeration, and sequence. Some are harder for students than others, as

argued by Smith and Hahn, and differences between Latin and English may also make them harder. For example, compare/contrast paragraphs are harder in general, and they also may have differences between English and Latin. In Latin, as shown for example in Cicero, the subject often changes back and forth within each sentence between the two persons being compared, with gapping in parallel clauses, whereas English tends to focus more on one, with fewer changes in subject. One method that can be helpful is arranging the text *per cola et commata*, as will be shown. The narrative type is generally easy and straightforward, often following a chronological order, but the inclusion of digressions may make them not as easy in Latin.

This paper will also review common structural markers and note comparisons between different authors (and genres), such as Caesar, Cicero, and Vergil. For example, Latin can use an initial partitive genitive to set up a series of descriptions or narratives of sub-groups. Going through a Latin passage and noting how each sentence relates to the previous sentence can help students understand Latin word order and the importance and distinction of “function” words and other structural markers, such as for identifying the beginning and end of a digression. One can also have students make predictions based on the beginning of a sentence, with or without the preceding sentences. Many organized thought structures in Latin can also span multiple paragraphs (and assignments); outlining, for example, can be used to help students see the forest and not get lost in the trees. This can be done by providing an outline, in English or Latin, or having students fill in the textual location references or blanks in an outline, or answering questions.

It is also worth discussing with students the effect of the differences in written texts in the original time period, such as the need and methods for marking the beginning and end of direct speech before the use of regular punctuation including quotation marks. There was also not the

indentation/formatting of “paragraphs,” or even the modern concept of the “standard” “topic sentence” paragraph that many students have learned. One can, for example, give students plain/straight text and have them (discuss and) mark the punctuation and/or possible paragraph breaks based on structural indicators, content, and other factors.

Bibliography

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