

Language Learning While Dyslexic, or, How I Made My Peace with Greek

This paper will give a student's perspective on learning classical subject matter with dyslexia and becoming a professional classicist. Though I initially thrived in Latin, Greek was a profound struggle. As I show, achieving mastery over ancient languages while dyslexic requires profound discipline, diligent practice, and a great deal of time.

Most of my academic achievements come down to brute force and raw determination. I have achieved PhD level mastery of both Latin and ancient Greek through long hours of slowly forcing my way through as much text as possible. Because the dyslexic brain requires a great deal of stimulation to develop language processing abilities, the best way for a dyslexic to learn any language, English included, is through intensive immersion, reading, writing, and speaking. There is no way of making the language learning process less time consuming, or less difficult. In order to master Latin and Greek, I have had to build the necessary neural connections through near constant exposure to these two languages throughout my education as a classicist.

After struggling for years to achieve a passable knowledge of Spanish, I decided on a whim to take a Latin class in my sophomore year of high school. Latin was like a miracle. The very process of learning Latin appealed to my strengths, rather than my weaknesses. I never struggled to memorize vocabulary or paradigms. In fact, I seldom had to spend any effort to memorize them at all, thanks in part to the lateral transfer from Spanish and in part to the fact that my memory was particularly well trained. Since dyslexics have an easier time remembering oral information than writing it down, we all tend to develop excellent memories for auditory information.

I was not a particularly outstanding Latin student, but the traditional Latin teaching method reduced many of the barriers that had previously caused me to struggle. I no longer had to try and speak the language, so embarrassing issues of pronunciation and word recall were alleviated. The phonetic spelling of the language also helped when I was required to read out loud. All these factors combined to give me a passion for the language that led me to take enough Latin classes to inadvertently qualify for a Latin major in college.

Greek was another matter entirely. While my poor instructors and I had bludgeoned the Latin alphabet into my head in my extreme youth, I had no such scaffolding in place for Greek letters. On the contrary, associating the squiggles with sounds was nearly impossible. To make matters worse, I have the usual dyslexic's trouble with processing spatial information. As the spatial analysis center in the brain affects the ability to differentiate between similar letters, even identifying the new Greek letters was a struggle. To this day, I cannot reliably read more than short phrases out loud in Greek. I did well enough in Introductory Greek, but the amount of time I had to devote to the sequence hurt my overall academic performance. I conceded defeat and focused on Latin.

The turning point in my Greek studies came when I decided to go to graduate school to earn my Classics PhD. I grimly enrolled in the University of Chicago's summer intensive Greek program. The grammar review was helpful, but the real virtue of the class for me came in the last three weeks, where we read five hours-worth of Greek each day, then prepared another five hours-worth of Greek each night. This sort of program is perfect for a dyslexic student, if they have the will to stick with it. It delivers the intensive engagement with the language necessary to stimulate the brain to develop a new neural network. There is no better way for a dyslexic to learn a language, especially one with an unfamiliar alphabet. Afterward, I determinedly enrolled

in a Greek seminar every semester of my graduate school career, auditing them after I no longer needed to take classes for credit, although I was not and never intended to be a Greek philologist. Preparations for these seminars took up most of my free time as a graduate student, but in the end I was able to read Greek at a speed that approximated a typical classicist.

Ultimately, learning languages with a language processing disability is a matter of time. Time that I might have spent on research or on my own area of specialization had to be dedicated to the mastery of languages. Even so, it is possible to achieve a PhD level mastery of languages and be successful as a classical scholar with a neurocognitive disability, as long as one has determination and the financial resources to take intensive classes, as necessary.