

## Laying the Foundation for Latin Vocabulary Acquisition: The First 1000 Words

As a field, Classics has been a forerunner in the digital humanities with projects as wide-ranging as the discipline itself: innovative databases, image archives, mapping projects, lexica, and language tools that support research and teaching at every level. When writing our own Latin curriculum, we asked how we could employ this abundance of resources and build on existing vocabulary acquisition tools to help students learn and retain key vocabulary. In this paper we show how the Dickinson Core Vocabulary list, part of the Dickinson College Commentary (DCC) project led by Christopher Francese, can be used to create and adapt texts that facilitate meaningful vocabulary acquisition and reading fluency in introductory Latin courses.

Second language pedagogy has long recognized the centrality of vocabulary in language acquisition, a principle that has grown in importance in the teaching of Greek and Latin (Muccigrosso, 2004). The Dickinson Core Vocabulary list is an excellent tool for promoting Latin vocabulary acquisition. It presents the 1000 most common words in Latin in a user-friendly search engine (<https://dcc.dickinson.edu/latin-core-list1>). Teachers and students can search for specific words, sort all words alphabetically or by frequency, and filter the words by part of speech or by over 35 different semantic groups such as Emotions, The Household, or Travel. If students learn the full complement of 1000 words, they will approach reading Latin authors with roughly 70% of the vocabulary they will encounter in most Latin texts (Francese, 2021).

While having a list of the most common Latin words is incredibly useful, figuring out how to use it productively with beginning students is a challenge when teaching from existing

Latin textbooks. Latin curricula have their own vocabulary outside of the Dickinson DCC list which students must learn. Additional required vocabulary might be overwhelming for students. Further, determining how to best organize the additional lists of vocabulary for students presents significant difficulties. For example, asking students to learn vocabulary in order of frequency emphasizes the words students will see most commonly when reading but lacks thematic coherence and does not offer a balance of vocabulary representing different parts of speech.

In our paper, we will demonstrate how we used the Dickinson Core list when we began to develop our own Latin curriculum. One of our founding premises was to introduce students to as many of the 1000 most common Latin words as possible so that they would have a strong foundation for reading a range of Latin authors. Our aim was to introduce vocabulary through reading passages that focus on the most common Latin words and that are intentional about the frequency with which they occur. We used the Dickinson Core list to shape two separate sections of the curriculum: 1) a narrative about a Roman family in Carthage that we wrote for the first half of the curriculum and 2) the many passages we adapted from ancient authors as supplemental readings. At the end of the curriculum students will have learned 859 words, more than 800 of these words are from Dickinson's list and all but three are from the top 500 words. Twenty-five of the words that were added outside of the core vocabulary are high frequency words in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* of which the students read large sections in the second half of the curriculum.

Through this process we have found that there is tremendous benefit in building on existing electronic resources to create or enhance a Latin curriculum through core vocabulary. Learning the most common Latin words as they occur naturally in reading passages

whether adapted from ancient authors or written afresh results in better acquisition of vocabulary and recognition in context. Students also learn the value of keeping up with assigned vocabulary to build cumulative knowledge. This allows them to complete readings and exercises with minimal glosses. Additionally, the benefit of this approach extends beyond introductory language courses: the Core vocabulary list does not prepare students to read a specific text in intermediate and advanced classes but a variety of texts with greater ease.

### Bibliography

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Muccigrosso, John. 2004. "Frequent Vocabulary in Latin Instruction." *Classical World*, 97, 409-433.