

# Quo Vadis? Laboring in the Classical Vineyards:

## An Optimal Challenge for Gifted Secondary Students

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This article puts forth an argument for the optimal match of the subject matter of Latin for verbally precocious students at the secondary level, beginning no later than the middle school years. It delineates the major benefits for students of learning the language and links those benefits to a view of differentiation in curricula and instruction of the gifted. Furthermore, the article provides a blueprint for schools on developing a Latin program of study over the secondary years.

*He studied Latin like the violin, because he liked it.*  
—Robert Frost

Latin has become something of a tradition in my family. I studied the classics for 8 years, then taught it for 5. My husband took 4 years of Latin, and now our daughter is declaring her college major in the classics.

For me at least, laboring in the classical vineyards seems to be a natural progression, a necessary step in life. The Latin bug infected me most strongly in college. I had one of the foremost authorities on the language as my classics professor for 4 years. Dr. Wheelock's *Latin* (1995), now in its sixth edition, is still being used as a college text to introduce new generations to the language. When I directed the Midwest Talent Search at Northwestern University, we routinely offered Latin in the summer program to middle school students, and it was his text students encountered.

Wheelock's text still populates the shelves of classics professors at my university and others. As my own daughter has come to appreciate Latin, so too did Wheelock's daughters. In the foreword to his newest edition, they discuss the importance of Latin in their lives growing up:

The etymology of a word would trigger lengthy discussion, often tedious for us as adolescents but abiding as we became adults . . . as young girls we were peppered with phrases of philosophical power from the ancients, and our father would show how these truths and lessons were alive and valid today. (Wheelock, 2000, p. xiv)

Thus, the enduring personal relevance and educational value to be derived from a study of the classics cannot be underestimated. Students today may find the same riches in learning this language as did generations before them, as the benefits are deeply ingrained in the intellectual fabric of our contemporary world.

### Benefits of Taking Latin for Verbally Precocious Students: The Optimal Match

While the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2000) reported that only 1.3% of high school students currently take Latin, the College Board, which adminis-

ters the Advanced Placement program, reported a 95% increase since 1993 in students taking the Latin exam for college credit. States like Virginia, for example, offer Latin for gifted middle school students in selected school districts, run a countywide summer program in a rural area of the state, and offer it as a regular option for elementary students at a college Saturday program. Moreover, each year the state sponsors a 3-week Latin Academy in which selected students have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the subject with classics professors from across the state.

What has caused such a resurgence of interest in a subject frequently made fun of for its irrelevance? Perhaps the new American obsession with standards and substantive learning may have helped bring about the trend. Critics would contend that (1) Latin is a “dead” language with no practical value; (2) it does not “train” the mind as once believed; (3) it is difficult; (4) it is text-based learning, not aural-oral in technique; and (5) it is irrelevant to today’s youth. Nevertheless, many educators and students have found it to be useful in many ways.

Latin has many hidden benefits that are not often explicated and, therefore, are not well understood. It is especially well matched to verbally precocious learners who have the capacity to handle abstraction and rigorous analytical activity. The following benefits are worthy of commentary:

1. *Latin develops intellectual habits of mind.* It provides a structure for thinking about language that can be transferred to other work, as well. Studies have shown its positive impact on minority student learning in reading and mathematics, for example (Harrington & Lueker, 1992).
2. *Latin teaches deep analysis.* It forces students to think deeply about what they are learning. Analyzing complex sentence structures and word forms focuses attention on the interplay of form and substance. Because a student must “work on” Latin, success at unlocking translations yields deeper understanding of these language forms and the ideas they present about antiquity.
3. *Latin provides an understanding of Western heritage.* How do mainstream U.S. students understand their roots? One wonderful strategy is to learn Latin, the language of Western thought and civilization. Reading ancient writers and thinkers provides an understanding of contemporary ideas.
4. *Latin enhances English vocabulary.* One year of Latin benefits students significantly in enhancing English vocabulary learning, even in comparison to students taking a Greek and Latin roots course in English (VanTassel-Baska, 1987). Other studies have shown enhanced reading ability for students who have taken Latin for only 1 year over students who have taken 4 years in other languages (Van Stekelenburg, 1984).
5. *Latin enhances English linguistic competency.* Because students must earn the rudiments of English grammar in

order to master Latin forms, they become more familiar with their own language. As a consequence, they also show enhanced understanding of English grammar after only a year of Latin learning (VanTassel-Baska, 1987).

6. *Latin provides a strong base for third language learning.* Because so many languages are derived from Latin, typical school languages like French and Spanish are made easier for students to acquire after a year or two of Latin (Prager, 2000).
7. *Latin exemplifies interdisciplinary studies by combining history, literature, art, and philosophy with the study of the language itself.* If educators want to enhance interdisciplinary learning, teaching Latin is an ideal way to do it. Studying a language penetrates the heart of a culture as no other approach does other than living in the culture itself. Language conveys all the symbols, ideas, and relevant cues about a culture to an outsider, thus making it easier to understand.
8. *Latin provides the challenge of learning a new abstract symbol system.* Learning Latin provides the slake in the thirst of gifted students for challenge. It is complex, yet logical, systematic, and yields enjoyment through opportunities to study classical literature and ancient history. Both public and private schools have found that Latin learning enlivens elementary classrooms (Wilhelm & Wilhelm, 1991).
9. *Latin provides higher level thinking through constant analogies from contemporary ideas to Roman and Greek thought.* Latin engages students in higher level thought with proverbs, idioms, and commentary from eminent authors. It provides them with the basic philosophical tenets of life; thus, Latin might be regarded as “Confucianism for Westerners.” Its authors explicate both the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies, ways of being in the world still seen today as archetypes for living.

Table 1 on the next page presents key features to be studied and learned in Latin coursework. Each feature is considered central to appropriate differentiation for gifted learners.

### Latin as an Accelerative Experience

Only two subjects are comparatively easy to accelerate in our schools at any level: mathematics and foreign language. The reason for this is their cumulative organizational patterns, where incrementalization is essential to learning the subjects deeply and well. Thus, Latin offers a special opportunity to accelerate learning for gifted students. It may begin as early as fifth grade and be formally taught from then on. Proficiency in the first 2 years of high school may be attained by most gifted students by the end of their eighth-grade year. Advanced Placement options may be accessed by sophomore and junior

Table 1

**A Grid of Latin Learning for the Gifted**

Concepts to be studied	Justice, duty, honor, wisdom
Interdisciplinary subjects studied	History, philosophy, art, music, literature
Higher level skills	Analysis, synthesis, evaluation, analogical reasoning, debate (evaluation of argument)
Products to be developed	Plays and skits, costumes, stories, Web pages, brochures, logos, Latin poetry, short stories, skits
Role models and heroes studied	Roman mythological characters, Aeneas, Caesar, Cicero, Horace, Marcus Aurelius, Augustus
Habits of mind developed	Intellectual curiosity, intellectual empathy, intellectual honesty/humility

years in high school. Because of logical organizational patterns and a tight scope and sequence, acceleration of the subject is made easier to accomplish through use of a diagnostic–prescriptive technique. Table 2 depicts one student’s accelerative experience in Latin, beginning in the fifth grade and culminating in advanced work in a second language, as well.

Acceleration within a Latin course can also occur with regularity for gifted learners. The basic grammatical structures of gender, number, and case can be compressed and used as a basis for “prescribing” learning, with careful follow-up assessment. Practice in constructions and other grammatical experiences can be truncated for the gifted while all vocabulary and most translations should be learned for building competency and cultural value. Studies from talent search universities have continued to demonstrate that a year of Latin can be compressed into 75 hours of instruction in the summer while retaining strong mastery over time (VanTassel-Baska & Olszewski-Kubilius, 1988). During the academic year, accelerating the pace of learning by grouping gifted learners together in the Latin classrooms has also been found to be effective (Coffin, 1981). New online materials in Latin also allow for greater self-pacing in learning the language (Mc Manus, 2001) and alternative roles for Latin teachers as facilitators of language learning (Shelton, 2000).

**Learning Outcomes From Latin Instruction**

What specific learning do students accrue from taking Latin? The following sets of learning clusters are examples of the types of outcomes students can achieve.

Latin is a route to understanding word relationships. Students come to understand English roots, stems, and cognates that come from Latin. Since 60% of our words are derived from Latin, it provides an important and economical vocabulary development tool. Moreover, synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms become more interesting as students learn

Table 2

**Acceleration Pattern**

Grade	Accelerated Options
5	Beginning language instruction
6–7	Homeschooling/tutorial (Latin I)
8	Latin II
9	Latin III
10	AP Latin IV (Vergil) French I & II
11	AP Latin V Catalus & Horace (Independent study) French III & IV

more Latin-derived English words. Learning how to construct analogies and how to understand them also becomes a part of the basic word relationship model that Latin offers.

Latin is also a route to understanding linguistics, the grammar and syntax of language, its sentence patterns, and its underlying units of meaning. Because much of learning Latin is grounded in syntactical construction, students become highly sensitized to the structure of language and the constant comparison of English and Latin in this dimension.

Latin is a route to creative production. Students can take Latin out of its context and apply it to contemporary life. Linkages to applied fields like architecture, engineering, and athletics may be made, showing how the underpinning of each field owes its basic structure to the Romans. Creative activities may include the following:

- performing the ancient plays of Plautus and Terence;
- translating English favorites like *Winnie the Pooh* into Latin;
- analyzing the rise and fall of the Roman Empire in relationship to more contemporary empires like Great Britain and the U.S.;

- conducting a study of Roman dress by creating costumes and holding a fashion show;
- designing logos using Latin sayings and idioms; and
- creating modern analogues of Roman myths.

Latin provides a direct route to understanding modern democratic governments. Cicero's ideas are as timely today as they were in first-century Rome. His concern for the rule of law, representational democracy, and the people's will to have avenues of expression are all contained in his writings. His ideas still govern our lives today through the constitutions of both the United States and Great Britain (Everitt, 2001). Modern politics can be understood through the formation of ancient coalitions like the triumvirates, which were made up of men who each had something important to contribute, but could only gain power through collaborating with others. The seeds of special interest groups were sown in Roman politics, as well as the spirit of oratory in moving people to action, swaying opinion, and ultimately deciding the fate of individuals and groups.

Latin is a route to personal relevance and creating meaning. Many universal ideas of philosophy over the centuries can be traced back to Roman and Greek roots. The two major Roman philosophies of epicureanism (*carpe diem*) and stoicism (*duty*) frame our current worldviews of how to lead a good life. Live in the present with an eye to material gain or live in line with a sense of responsibility to others. Both views still compete for dominance today. Other central themes explored in a study of Latin include *aurea mediocritas* (the golden mean between extremes), the journey or quest, and the *summum bonum* (the greatest good).

Moreover, Latin can serve as a Rosetta stone to unlocking an understanding of our cultural heritage. It can help students understand that the Roman empire and its ideas dominated thought and action in both Western and Eastern parts of Europe and into Asia and Africa and that its traces are profound not only in continental Europe, but also in Britain, where Roman history is still definitive in all ways of life. The idea of cities and the infrastructure to maintain them, including the engineering marvel of the aqueduct, was a Roman contrivance. We understand our pagan history through the Greek and Roman myths, including ancient science and medicine, as well as religion. Our literature, art, and music today are heavily dependent on classical ideas, forms, and allusions to provide continuity and substance to our understanding of the world.

### **What Can Secondary Schools Do to Provide Latin Learning?**

Acting on behalf of gifted students, secondary schools can proactively ensure that Latin is a staple of their curricular base. It can be offered at the upper elementary level in cluster groups,

pull-out programs, or self-contained programs as an intervention of choice. By middle school, it should be taught as a separate class. Ideally, gifted students should enter high school with 2 years of Latin in their portfolio of accomplishments. The following guidelines may be helpful in initiating such a Latin revival:

1. Offer Latin as a full-year option no later than seventh grade for students who show advanced verbal reasoning ability through appropriate assessment methods.
2. Provide a scope and sequence of Latin courses up through at least AP Latin Virgil, spanning the secondary years of schooling.
3. Encourage at least 2 years of course-taking in the language for all verbally able learners. Provide counseling and guidance support for this as a highly desirable curricular option for gifted learners.
4. Counsel students to continue with Latin after 2 years or begin a second language as ninth graders. Whether students continue in Latin or not, it is important that they continue second or third language learning.
5. Offer Latin as an enrichment option in summer school or in Saturday programs on a cross-grade basis. For districts unable to mount programs during regular school time, treating Latin as an extracurricular subject can also be effective.
6. Use competency tests in the subject to place students appropriately. Some gifted students may need more or less time to master the fundamentals of the language. Thus, careful testing should accompany the use of Latin as a program option.

Coordinators of gifted programs may also wish to start a summer Latin academy in their state or local area to accommodate interest. Collaboration with a college or university in offering courses to advanced high school students should yield strong support. There is also a need to provide guidance to parents and students on the value of taking Latin since many of them might not be aware of its "hidden jewels." Coordinators may also wish to consider Latin as the language of choice in self-contained programs for the gifted by fifth or sixth grade to ensure early access to the language. Barrington, IL, is one school district that offers the language to gifted students at this level.

### **Concerns of Schools**

In addressing common concerns schools have about new course initiation, two issues frequently arise. One is the concern about finding qualified teachers. Latin teachers are available in many locales. Local colleges may be tapped for undergraduates who are majoring in the subject. These stu-

dents are usually advanced enough in subject matter to offer beginning coursework, especially to middle school students. Retired Latin teachers also are often willing to come back to initiate special programs, rather than teaching a full load. The American Classical League maintains a Web site and journal where access to qualified teachers may be procured.

A second concern many times expressed is that of student recruitment. How do we establish a “pipeline” for such courses? The issue of ensuring that at least 15 students per year will take the proposed classes is an important one. Recruitment may take several forms. As a gifted program option, the gifted coordinator (either at the high school, at the district level, or both) should facilitate a strong counseling program for students and parents on academic course-taking strategies within which the argument for the benefits of Latin may be made. If such recruitment techniques were systematically applied within gifted programs, a resurgence of interest would be guaranteed.

Scheduling extra classes or electives is sometimes seen as a problem in secondary schools. At the middle school level, Latin could be scheduled as the “gifted class” or as a “quest” option among many offered to all students. It can be an early bird class before the official start of the school day or an extra class at the end of the day. If a school is convinced of a course’s value and other issues have been addressed, such as procuring a teacher and guaranteeing sufficient student interest, a scheduling maven can make the course happen.

### Conclusion

The study of Latin can be a real joy for verbally precocious students if they can access it early in their secondary school experience. Its benefits are profound and clearly provide an optimal match for our most gifted students. Our rush to translate cultural relevance into its lowest common denominator of athletes and rock stars and to “dumb down” the cur-

ricular base at the middle school level are prime examples of the anti-intellectual nature of U.S. education. Latin is the perfect antidote to such actions in its disciplined rigor, universal ideas, and rich cultural history.

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