

DRIVING WITH DIDO

HOW I CAME TO READ LATIN EXTENSIVELY

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When I started teaching Latin, I couldn't read it myself. Now I can—not quite as fast as I read my native languages, but nevertheless in “real time” and with great enjoyment and profit. Seven or eight years ago, it might have taken me an hour to make sense of a page of Latin prose; last year, I read Cicero's *Pro Archia* with glee during half a prep period and routinely took the edge off computer lab duty by imbibing multiple chapters of *Noctes Atticae* or dialogues of Erasmus. On a two-day road trip last summer, I listened with gusto to the entire *Aeneid*, sometimes using the speed-up feature so as to reach a good stopping point in the plot before reaching a good stopping point on the differently epic Pennsylvania turnpike.

So, what changed? Basically, I discovered some suitable texts and developed some helpful habits. While sharing these in conversations during the last two years, I have been asked many times to describe them in writing, which entreaties have finally resulted in this article. It follows a middle road between narrative testimony and naked list of texts, with the result that the core feature of this document is a set of specific texts I read in my first several years of learning Latin, each of which represents a genre or a type of reading pursuit and is accompanied by specific Key Points about reading habits or reading selection. The narrative introduction and interludes can be skipped with little loss, but I include them because many a conversation partner has found the context they provide enlightening.

What follows is not a prescription, or even a strong suggestion, but merely a description of a particular person's path. Nor does it address all types of or motivations for reading; it focuses on the experience of Extensive Reading for the enjoyment of a text and the building of one's fluency. I hope you find something of use!

How It Began

About a year after graduating from college, while attending graduate school in a different field, I decided it would be fun to learn Latin.

I couldn't have named a single Latin textbook other than the German publisher Langenscheidt's *Via Nova*, of which I could get my hands only on volume I, so I sought the reference section at Barnes and Noble and bought the only Latin textbook there: *Wheelock's Latin*, 6th rev. ed., along with *Wheelock's Latin Workbook*. Thus began the journey whose phases are roughly outlined below.

Phase 1 – “This Is Not Reading”

Wheelock's Latin was written for soldiers, and I obeyed its instructions as dutifully as one. I learned the exact pronunciation propounded in the introduction, except that I substituted Italian vowels for the American approximations in the textbook. I think I am one of the few users of the book who actually followed the instruction on p.5 to read each sentence aloud from beginning to end and to read for comprehension before attempting a translation. (My general practice was to read each sentence or passage first silently twice, then aloud, then silently again, and then to write a translation.)

Wheelock's Latin has 40 chapters. I read all the chapters and completed all the exercises in the textbook and workbook in 40 days. Now I was ready to read Latin.

I intended to prove this for myself by proceeding to *Wheelock's Latin Reader*. So I bought the *Reader* and flipped to the first section, which consists of excerpts from Cicero's orations against Verres. Before finishing the first page (that is to say, the small section of Latin that, together with the map and the English notes and glosses, constitutes the first page), I had made two discoveries that crucially altered my Latin-learning and, later, my Latin-teaching:

First, what I was doing—finding the gloss for every third word, reading all the grammatical notes, and then trying to figure out what the text might mean—was not reading. At least, it was not reading in the sense most people mean when they talk about “reading a book.”

Second, what I was doing then was not what I wanted my interactions with Latin generally to be like.

So I did what anyone would do: I gave up and tried reading the *Aeneid* instead. The lines were shorter, and, unlike with Cicero's Verrines, I had actually heard of it and would think it cool to have read it in Latin.

I had the same basic experience with the *Aeneid* as I had had with *In Verrem*, but I recognized that a big part of the problem was my small vocabulary, so I started studying the vocab of the *Aeneid* by frequency. This got me far enough to begin audaciously tutoring AP Latin: *Vergil* students, which is how a particular Head of School heard that I knew Latin (he didn't know that I merely “knew” Latin), which is how I ended up a high school Latin teacher less than a year later. But I still couldn't read, in any sense that satisfied not just my intellect, but also my definition of reading, the *Aeneid* or any other Latin I knew of.

It's worth noting that, despite my initial inability to read them, Cicero's orations would take on a valuable role in my Latin-reading journey: as a Ciceronian speech had been the first bit of Latin I had ever encountered outside of an introductory textbook, a Ciceronian speech became my barometer for measuring the improvement of my Latin. The speech I used in this way was the first Catilinarian, for the goofy reason that I misremembered *In Catilinam*, rather than *In Verrem*, as the text I had first attempted. I approached and abandoned *Oratio in L. Catilinam Prima* periodically before finally reading the whole thing a few years after the initial try. Now I can read and enjoy it in a single sitting, as I did recently on a

flight to Cabo San Lucas. (There was something aesthetically blissful about reading that particular speech while voluntarily exiling myself from my own country, not for abusing someone else's patience, but to restore my own.)

I praise *Wheelock's* for its insistence that one read Latin aloud and that one read and understand before, not by, translating. Both of these were crucial to my fledgling fluency. And *Wheelock's* is up front about its goal: to be "a book which provides both the roots and at least some literary fruits of a sound Latin experience for those who will have only one year of Latin in their entire educational career, and a book which at the same time provides adequate introduction and encouragement for those who plan to continue their studies in the field" (xiv). What I didn't know I needed—something that is missing not just from *Wheelock's* and its ancillaries, but from most textbooks of any language—was hundreds of pages of captivating reading at every level.

Key Points from Phase 1:

- 1.1. Know what you want to be able to do.
- 1.2. Distinguish between reading and deciphering.
- 1.3. Read aloud.
- 1.4. Identify a barometer text that you can come back to in order to gauge your progress.

Texts that played a key role:

Wheelock's Latin Textbook, Workbook, and Reader; Cicero's First Catilinarian Oration; Vergil's Aeneid

Phase 2 – Flowmilia Romana

Early in my second year of teaching Latin—I have no idea why it took this long and I'm ashamed that it did—I realized I not only didn't really know Latin, but also didn't know how to teach it. So I did what anyone would: I typed "How to teach Latin" into Google. I don't remember most of what I found, but I know I ended up on the Latinteach listserv, where I heard of the then-young latin-bestpractices Yahoo group. Through the latter I learned of a book and of an organization (SALVI) that, in combination, helped me find my way out of attempting merely to decode Latin texts. I say "find my way" because I was genuinely lost. I was sure I needed to be doing something differently if I was actually to be able to read Latin fluently, but hadn't had any idea where to turn. I hadn't known a single person who knew Latin.

The book was Hans Ørberg's *Lingua Latina Per Se Illustrata: Familia Romana* (hereafter *FR*). I judged at a glance that it wouldn't make a good textbook (not enough explicit grammar instruction, I thought), but that it might make a helpful reader for someone like me who had already memorized the paradigms.

I decided to try to read *FR* without attempting to translate any of it into another language, since it was clear to me that part of the point of learning a language is not to need a translation. Doing this, I was able to "flow" until chapter 7 or 8; at that point, the vocabulary became overwhelming. *FR* introduces, on average, just under 50 words per

chapter, all of which are meant to be mastered before one proceeds to the next chapter. Also, because of the subject matter—the daily life of a Roman family—there were many words I hadn't encountered in *Wheelock's* or the *Aeneid*.

Here, for reasons I can't recall, I made a decision that worked wonders for my reading ability: I didn't abandon the book, but neither did I turn my energies to studying the vocabulary that seemed to be my stumbling block, as I had tried when going through the *Aeneid*. Instead, I simply started back at the beginning of the book, and again read as far as I could. I figured, correctly, as it turned out, that I would internalize a bit more of the vocabulary each time I re-read the chapters and thus would eventually make it further and further through the book; in the process, I hoped, the syntax would become second nature. I might read chapters 1-7 three days in a row, then chapters 1-9 four days in a row, then chapters 1-12 several days in a row, and so forth. (There are 35 chapters, of which the last is a grammatical dialogue adapted from Donatus's *Ars Minor*.) In this way, after a few weeks, I was reading up through the chapters in the mid-twenties, at which point, for time reasons, I began to divide my reading of the book over multiple days. After about two months, I could flow through the entire story over the course of two or three days, without any problems of vocabulary or syntax. Eventually, I completed the same process with Volume II: *Roma Aeterna*, although it took a lot longer than with Volume I.

By the way, I ended up convincing my student's parents to buy them *FR*.

Key points from Phase 2:

- 2.1. Read what you can—something easy enough that you can “flow” through it and thus read lots of it.
- 2.2. Read the same thing over and over again.
- 2.3. In texts of gradually increasing difficulty, keep starting over at the beginning instead of picking up where you last struggled.
- 2.4. Read the passages in different textbook series (e.g., *Wheelock's Latin*, *Lingua Latina Per Se Illustrata*, *Cambridge Latin Course*, *Oxford Latin Course*, *Latin for Americans*, *Ecce Romani*, *Latin for the New Millennium*); different series focus on different words and structures, and starting at the beginning of each series will make the readings easy enough that you can read a higher volume at a sitting.
- 2.5. Be willing to change your approach.

Texts that played a key role:

Hans Ørberg's *Lingua Latina Per Se Illustrata: Familia Romana* and *Lingua Latina Per Se Illustrata: Roma Aeterna*

Phase 3 – “So that's how you say it in Latin!”

Through reading *FR* I had become convinced of the value of what I would later learn is called Extensive Reading, i.e., spending extended time reading many pages of a text that is interesting enough and easy enough for one to do so, as opposed to Intensive Reading, which involves decoding, analysis, or both, and therefore requires shorter passages at a

session. The problem was that I still didn't know of any other Latin texts that I could read extensively.

Just before SALVI's immersion event *Rusticatio Virginiana 2008*, I discovered Peter Needham's translations of the first two Harry Potter books, and I decided to read them right after *Rusticatio* to make the most of my newly activated Latin. There was a major practical obstacle, because I departed two days after *Rusticatio* on a three-week rafting and hiking trip through the Grand Canyon, but I still managed to read about a chapter a day in *Harrius Potter et Philosophi Lapis* and *Harrius Potter et Camera Secretorum*. I decided not to look up any words, but to underline words that I wanted to look up later. Flipping through my waterlogged copies, I see about one word per page underlined.

It is important to emphasize that I could read the *Harry Potter* books Extensively in Latin only because I had read the English originals several times; otherwise, many words per page would have baffled me.

I've since read the translations listed below many times each and have enjoyed recognizing the ways in which my own Latin has improved along the way: I understand things I didn't understand before, I catch mistakes I wouldn't have caught before, and I make connections between these texts and others that I have read in the meantime.

Key points from Phase 3:

- 3.1. Read something in which you already know what happens.
- 3.2. Read something that you want to read for hours.
- 3.3. It's okay to read "inauthentic" texts; their Latin might still be better than yours.
- 3.4. Re-read translations-into-Latin and gauge the progress of your fluency both by your increased understanding and by your recognition of errors and of phrases more redolent of the original idiom than of Latin.

Texts that played a key role: *Harrius Potter (-et Philosophi Lapis, -et Camera Secretorum)* and other translations (*Winnie Ille Pu, Mysterium Arcae Boulé, Fabulae Divales*, etc.)

Phase 4 – 2300 Years Of Great Stuff

The approach of this article changes here, because reading and re-reading all those translations gave me a good enough idea of Extensive Reading and a decent enough reading ability to start reading widely with profit, first, mainly post-classical texts, then, classical texts as well.

From here on, titles of assorted texts or anthologies I read in the last five or six years and, in most cases, re-read, are listed with the briefest descriptions, followed by Key Points. This is not an exhaustive account of my reading; I've included texts that highlight particular points about reading Extensively. Many of the Key Points could be derived from many of the texts, but I've usually listed them just once. I've tried to keep the Key Points concise; if

you would like further explanation of how they emerge from my experience with the texts, please feel free to email me at the address provided below.

-Beeson's *Primer Of Medieval Latin*, an anthology of medieval prose and poetry

Key points:

- 4.1. Enjoy someone else's selections.
- 4.2. Read something whose variety keeps you coming back to it.
- 4.3. Discover authors, texts, genres, registers, and vocabulary you haven't encountered.

-thelatinlibrary.com, which contains complete texts of many classical, medieval, Renaissance, and post-Renaissance works

Key points:

- 4.4. Read stuff that's easy to access and free to read.
- 4.5. Sometimes, just browse—read without “getting through” entire texts.
- 4.6. Discover authors and texts of which you haven't heard (e.g., Karl Marx's *Matura* essay, John Owens's epigrams, Edmond Halley's poetry, Alcuin's riddles).

-Renaissance versions of Aesop's Fables, e.g., those collected by Laura Gibbs in *Mille Fabulae et Una*

Key points:

- 4.7. Read widely in a particular genre.
- 4.8. Enjoy different versions of the same story.
- 4.9. Absorb different storytelling conventions.

-Lhomond's *Epitome Historiae Sacrae*, a summary of a few hundred biblical stories in classical Latin

Key points:

- 4.10. Read something with short installments.
- 4.11. Read something of which you can easily and quickly create audio recordings.
- 4.12. Read biblical stories rewritten in classical idiom.

-*Noctes Atticae* of Aulus Gellius, a miscellany of linguistic, practical, philosophical, mythological, legal, and literary tidbits.

Key points:

- 4.13. Read something quirky.
- 4.14. Read something you want to read every day.
- 4.15. Read “non-canonical” classical texts.

-*Fabulae* of Hyginus, short prose versions of myths

Key points:

- 4.16. Read a friend's recommendations. (I learned of these stories from Elliot Goodman.)
- 4.17. Enjoy recognizing a text's pet phrases.

-*Colloquia* – dialogues by Erasmus, Vives, Heyden, al.

Key points:

- 4.18. Read stuff about (someone's) everyday life.

- 4.19. Absorb different registers of Latin.
- 4.20. Read lots written in the 1st and 2nd person.

-*A First Latin Reader* by H. C. Nutting, with readings from both Roman and American history

Key points:

- 4.21. There are some gems out there.
- 4.22. Read things that were designed to be translated, without actually translating.
- 4.23. Read in Latin about things you normally wouldn't read about in Latin.
- 4.24. Learn/revisit some non-European history in Latin.

-Orations of Cicero

Key points:

- 4.25. Read something satisfying or exhilarating—I smile to myself once or twice a paragraph as I enjoy Cicero's turns of phrase or how he sets up a conclusion.
- 4.26. Read what for millennia has been a go-to example of fluid Latin.
- 4.27. Read longish texts at a single sitting. My general practice is, if at all possible, to read in a single sitting any text that was meant to be read, delivered, or performed at one go. This includes most orations, letters, and plays.

-Letters of Cicero (*Epistulae ad Familiares, ad Atticum, ad Brutum, ad Quintum*)

Key points:

- 4.28. Read texts in different genres by the same author.
- 4.29. Read everyday educated Latin.

-Letters of Seneca (*Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*)

Key points:

- 4.30. Read short, high-density things.
- 4.31. Re-read short, high-density texts over the course of a week. Here is a sample 5-day scheme: 1. Read, 2. Read + conduct word study, 3. Read, 4. Read + record, 5. Read + compose Latin response/reflection/exercise.
- 4.32. Do something with what you read (cf. 5-day scheme above).

General Suggestions and Encouragement

1. Read in various ways: sometimes aloud, sometimes silently; sometimes fast, sometimes slowly; sometimes for a long time, sometimes for a short time.
2. Record yourself reading Latin and listen to your recordings in the car, while doing chores, while shopping, etc. I cannot emphasize enough the value this has had for me. (You can listen to a selection of my recordings at indwellinglanguage.com/latin-media/latin-audio.)
3. Read what interests you. You'll read much more if you're keen on the content.
4. Except for a class, a job, or personal discipline, don't bother reading something you don't feel like reading just because you think you're supposed to have read it. If you discover after starting a text that you're not really interested, don't feel like you have to finish it.
5. Figure out reading habits that work for you and cultivate them.

I would love to hear about your reading journey!

Justin Slocum Bailey operates Indwelling Language (www.indwellinglanguage.com), a service that brings joy and success to language teachers and learners by helping them live in the language and the language live in them. He can be reached at justin@indwellinglanguage.com.