
Keller, Andrew and Stephanie Russell.

Learn to Read Latin.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. Includes: textbook and accompanying workbook. ISBN: 0-300-10215-1.

There is possibly no greater challenge to a Latin teacher than smoothing the student's transition from the study of Latin grammar and syntax to reading actual Latin. Too often, students are intimidated and disheartened by their first encounters with "real" Latin texts. Therefore, the appearance of *Learn to Read Latin*, whose express purpose is to get students reading and appreciating authentic Latin texts as early in their studies as possible, should be a welcome improvement on the fabricated "Latinese" of most standard textbooks. Regrettably, although this series is a valuable addition to a Latin teacher's resources, it is not overly user-friendly, at least not for the secondary school student.

The level of detail and sophistication of the series suggests that its niche may well be the college classroom. This niche has in the past been filled by other texts, perhaps most successfully by *Wheelock's Latin*. The virtues of *Learn to Read Latin* would have to be considerable to persuade a college instructor to exchange it for the handy, time-tested Wheelock. However, the series does not provide a more effective, relevant, or accessible method for teaching the beginning college Latin student than Wheelock or other standard college texts.

For the secondary teacher, the series' deficits are more glaring. Its cumbersome size is truly problematic for students already lugging Sisyphean backpacks. It addresses only one of the components of the National Standards for Latin; speaking, writing, learning about Roman culture, and making comparisons/connections with the student's own culture are largely neglected. Even in its area of emphasis, its complexities of presentation would prove daunting to high schoolers and impenetrable to middle schoolers.

Learn to Read Latin has two major components: a textbook and an accompanying workbook. The textbook is divided into 15 dense chapters. Each chapter begins with a vocabulary list and includes extensive notes (including examples) on each vocabulary entry's meanings, uses, derivation, declension, compounds, etc., followed by sections on grammar and, finally, short, longer, and then continuous readings from Latin authors to support the grammatical content. The importance of vocabulary is apparent in its placement at the outset of each chapter. Its relevance to the grammar topics under consideration is commendable. As the authors suggest, the notes on the vocabulary are best used in conjunction with the grammar sections, because so much of it references issues of grammar that the student is about to learn and is not yet familiar with. For example, in Chapter 9,

where students are presented with the verb *impero*, the authors indicate that this verb can take a dative with an intransitive verb and introduce an indirect command, both of which are explained in the grammar sections that follow. A brief and ineffectual list of derivatives and cognates concludes each section of vocabulary notes. Without exercises to practice them, however, these derivatives can be of only fleeting interest to the student.

The authors' approach to vocabulary and grammar is comprehensive and linguistically detailed — too technical, in fact, for the average student of any level, including college students. (Still, we found it very enlightening — e.g., in their engaging discussion of vowel weakening on page 80 or in their thorough *Notes on the Participle: Relative time; Attributive and Circumstantial Uses* on pp. 224–225). As meticulously and exhaustively explained as they generally are, several important grammatical points, such as the lack of articles in Latin or the use of *ut* and *ne* to introduce purpose clauses, are oddly relegated to the fine print in the *Observations* sections.

The authors try to follow a natural pattern, e.g., direct questions followed by indirect questions in Chapter 12, yet leave the greetings “Hello” and “Goodbye” — always an ice-breaker for the first day of class — for Chapter 7. Nor do the authors distinguish subjects which students have little problem understanding or memorizing from those, such as the ablative absolute or the difference between *ipse* and *se*, which students often have a hard time conceptualizing.

The presentation of grammatical concepts is consistent throughout the text and the examples are excellent, although the authors' use of synthetic sentences as examples undercuts their ultimate goal of enabling students to comprehend genuine Latin texts. The short, longer, and continuous readings would be better placed as genuine examples for each grammar section, rather than clumped at the end of the chapter. For example, the authors provide Catullus' *Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus* as a short reading at the end of one chapter (p. 137); why not, instead, use it to illustrate the hortatory subjunctive, rather than offering the bland and artificial *Romam eamus* (p. 131)? More problematically, the density of grammar in each chapter, and lack of mnemonic devices (a staple of Latin middle and high school teachers' repertoire) complicates the student's task, despite the simplicity of the grammatical explanations.

The end of each chapter includes a plethora of progressively longer and more difficult readings of authentic Latin texts. Yet the authors fail to provide any rationale or guidance (beyond the simple, sometimes tenuous, grammatical connection, a summary, and biographical notes) for how and why students should read these texts. For example, the death of Turnus in the final 15 lines of the *Aeneid*, one of the longer readings at the end of the last chapter (p. 513), is given only a pithy introduction: “The end of the *Aeneid*: after Turnus begs for his life, Aeneas hesitates.” Although various selections of the epic appear throughout the textbook and the authors briefly introduce Vergil and his *Aeneid* much earlier on page 168, it is likely that students will have already forgotten what was said about the author and the *Aeneid* when they reach Chapter 15. The passage has no direct connection with the grammar presented in this last chapter, nor are there any linear notes to clarify the metrics, grammar, or context. Ancient texts without

context, notes, or further discussion are simply texts, and thus are no more significant to beginning students than those which are fabricated. Students, and their teachers, need a lot more direction when reading such a variety of ancient texts and authors to appreciate what they are reading. Moreover, Latin is a language that was written to be heard. Most, if not all, of the authors and selections that have been provided were meant to be read aloud, a fact that the authors themselves briefly acknowledge on page 180. Yet, apart from a presentation of metrical rules and an introduction to rhetorical devices, the authors place little emphasis on the vital spoken aspect of these passages.

The series' workbook is its strongest asset. Any teacher will find it an invaluable resource, primarily because each grammar section can be practiced separately from the others presented in the chapter, so the density of each chapter becomes less intimidating. Practice is essential to the beginning language student and the shorter sentences, rather than longer continuous readings, are appropriate for the novice, who is often overwhelmed and discouraged by longer, more complex readings, such as those in the textbook. At the end of the workbook, the authors have included perforated handouts summarizing the grammar topics in each chapter. The grammatical summaries are clearer and more concise than the explanations given in the textbook and thus more useful to students and teachers alike on a daily basis.

The primary objective for most students of Latin is to read Roman authors, and thereby get a glimpse into the life of the Romans and their profound impact on ancient and modern civilizations. *Learn to Read Latin* focuses on the first part of this goal, but fails to tell us why it is exciting, or even relevant, to be reading these ancient texts. The authors' lack of guidance makes it hard for any student new to Latin to actually appreciate what he or she is reading. The authors have ignored the reason why most middle and high school students and even many college students choose to take Latin in the first place: they want to get to know the Romans, not just their literature.

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Publisher's Response

Yale University Press wishes to thank Ms. Hoffman and Ms. Dawson for their thorough review of *Learn to Read Latin*. We do, however, disagree with several of their comments. While it is true that *Learn to Read Latin* is used more extensively in colleges than at lower levels, it is also used widely and with great success at public and private high schools and middle schools across the country. In all, this first edition is used at more than 100 institutions, ranging from grade 7 through college undergraduates. With regard to one of the reviewers' main concerns, that the readings are not contextualized in a way that makes students understand why they are interesting and why they should be reading them, we would hope that the instructor would be able to contextualize ancient Roman culture for his or her students. The authors have used these carefully chosen readings with great success in their own teaching for the past twenty years.

This first edition is in the process of being revised and a second edition will be available in 2010. The points raised in this review and those gleaned from the many other reviewers we have contacted will be carefully considered as we improve the text and workbook for the new edition.

With regard to the reviewers' point about the cumbersome weight of the text and workbook, they were apparently not aware that both books are now available in considerably lighter split editions, Parts 1 and 2. In addition, a Quia online workbook is now available for the Workbook Parts 1 and 2. So a student who is using the Textbook Part 1 (which is available in paperback and hardcover) and the Quia online workbook would only need to carry a comparatively light textbook to and from class. For information on the Quia workbook, go to yalebooks.com/quia.

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