A Comprehensive Guide to WHEELOCK'S LATIN

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD xvii
PREFACE xix

Chapter 1 1

Getting Started: Verbs

VERBS: THE BASICS 1
LATIN VERBS: THE BASICS 2
CONJUGATIONS OF LATIN VERBS 3
THE ENGLISH PRESENT TENSES 5
THE IMPERATIVE 5
THE INFINITIVE 6
DICTIONARY CONVENTIONS FOR VERBS 6
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 8
ONE LAST THING 8

Chapter 2 9

What's a Case?

WHAT'S A NOUN? WHAT'S A PRONOUN? 9
INFLECTION IN ENGLISH 9
INFLECTION IN LATIN 11
WHAT IS A CASE? 12
CASE ENDINGS OF THE FIRST DECLENSION 15
GENDER 17
DICTIONARY CONVENTIONS FOR NOUNS 17
AGREEMENT OF ADJECTIVES AND NOUNS 18
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 19

Chapter 3 21

Second Declension Nouns; What's an Adjective?

THE SECOND DECLENSION 21
SECOND DECLENSION NOUNS IN -ER AND -IR; STEM CHANGES 22
SECOND DECLENSION NOUNS ENDING IN -IUS 25

ADJECTIVES 26
APPOSITION 28
READING A LATIN SENTENCE (AKA WORD ORDER) 29
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 30

Chapter 4 31

More about the Second Declension; Sum; What's a Predicate?

NEUTERS OF THE SECOND DECLENSION 31
ADJECTIVES 32
THE VERB SUM. 33
SUBJECTS AND PREDICATES. 35
TRANSITIVE AND INTRANSITIVE VERBS: PREDICATE NOMINATIVES 35
SUM AS A COPULATIVE VERB 36
ADJECTIVES AS NOUNS 37
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 38

Chapter 5 41

The Future and Imperfect Tenses

FUTURE TENSE OF FIRST AND SECOND CONJUGATION VERBS 41
THE FORM OF THE IMPERFECT TENSE. 42
THE MEANING OF THE IMPERFECT TENSE 44
FIRST AND SECOND DECLENSION ADJECTIVES IN -ER. 44
DRILL. 46
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 46

Chapter 6 49

More about Sum

SUM, ESSE: FUTURE TENSE 49
SUM, ESSE: IMPERFECT TENSE 50
POSSUM: PRESENT, FUTURE, IMPERFECT TENSES 50
THE COMPLEMENTARY INFINITIVE 51
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 51

Chapter 7 53

The Third Declension

CASE ENDINGS OF THE THIRD DECLENSION 53
STEMS OF THIRD DECLENSION NOUNS 54

MODIFYING THIRD DECLENSION NOUNS 56
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 56

Chapter 8 59

Beginning the Third Conjugation

PRESENT INFINITIVE AND PRESENT TENSE 59
FUTURE TENSE. 60
FUTURE OF THIRD CONJUGATION VS. PRESENT OF SECOND 61
IMPERFECT TENSE 62
IMPERATIVE 63
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 64

Chapter 9 65

Demonstratives

THIS, THESE; THAT, THOSE IN ENGLISH 65
THE LATIN DEMONSTRATIVES: ILLE, HIC, ISTE 65
LEARNING TO LOVE THE HYBRID DECLENSION 68
ADJECTIVES IN -IUS AND -I 69
ALIUS AND ALTER. 69
THE DEMONSTRATIVE AS A PRONOUN 70
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 71

Chapter 10 73

Fourth Conjugation and -iō Verbs of the Third

REVIEW OF VERBS 73
FOURTH CONJUGATION 75
THIRD CONJUGATION I-STEM 75
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 78

Chapter 11 79

Personal Pronouns

THE ENGLISH PRONOUNS 79
THE WEAK DEMONSTRATIVE IS, EA, ID 81
IS, EA, ID AS A PRONOUN 83
THE DEMONSTRATIVE ĪDEM, EADEM, IDEM 85
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 85

Chapter 12 87

The Perfect Active System

VERBS: PRINCIPAL PARTS 87
LATIN VERBS: PRINCIPAL PARTS. 88
THE PERFECT SYSTEM OF LATIN VERBS 89
PERFECT TENSE 91
PLUPERFECT TENSE 91
FUTURE PERFECT TENSE 92
DRILLS 93
DRILLS: TENSES 96
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 97

Chapter 13 99

More Pronouns

FIRST AND SECOND PERSON REFLEXIVE PRONOUNS 99
THIRD PERSON REFLEXIVE PRONOUN 101
REFLEXIVE AND NON-REFLEXIVE POSSESSION 103
SELF VERSUS SELF VERSUS SELF 106
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 106

Chapter 14 107

More about the Third Declension; What To Do with Ablatives?

THIRD DECLENSION NOUNS (AGAIN) 107
THIRD DECLENSION I-STEM NOUNS 108
NEUTER I-STEMS 108
MASCULINE AND FEMININE I-STEMS. 109
USES OF THE ABLATIVE: MANNER, ACCOMPANIMENT, MEANS 111
ABLATIVE OF MANNER VERSUS ACCOMPANIMENT 112
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 112

Chapter 15 115

Numbers and Their Constructions

CARDINAL AND ORDINAL NUMBERS 115
ROMAN NUMERALS. 115
LATIN CARDINALS 116
THE HUNDREDS AND THOUSAND (MĪLLE, MĪLIA). 118

ORDINAL NUMBERS 119
GENITIVE OF THE WHOLE 120
ABLATIVE OF TIME: WHEN AND WITHIN WHICH 121
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 123

Chapter 16 125

Adjectives of the Third Declension

ADJECTIVES 125
ADJECTIVES OF THE THIRD DECLENSION 125
STEMS OF THIRD DECLENSION ADJECTIVES 127
ADJECTIVES OF TWO TERMINATIONS 128
ADJECTIVES OF ONE TERMINATION 128
ADJECTIVES OF THREE TERMINATIONS 129
DRILLS 129
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 130

Chapter 17 131

The Relative Pronoun

THE CLAUSE: WHAT IS IT? 131
ENGLISH RELATIVE CLAUSES 132
THE ENGLISH RELATIVE PRONOUN: CASE SYSTEM 133
THE LATIN RELATIVE PRONOUN 134
DRILLS 135
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 137

Chapter 18 139

Starting the Passive Voice

VOICE 139
PASSIVE VOICE IN ENGLISH 139
THE PASSIVE VOICE OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM IN LATIN 140
PRESENT TENSE PASSIVE FOR ALL CONJUGATIONS 141
FUTURE TENSE PASSIVE OF ALL CONJUGATIONS 141
IMPERFECT TENSE PASSIVE OF LATIN VERBS 142
THE PASSIVE INFINITIVE 142
ABLATIVE OF PERSONAL AGENT: AB + ABLATIVE 143
PASSIVE VOICE LIMITED TO TRANSITIVE VERBS 143

DRILLS 144
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 144

Chapter 19 145

Perfect Passive System; Answers about Questions

PERFECT PASSIVE SYSTEM 145
THE PASSIVE VOICE IN ENGLISH 145
THE LATIN PERFECT PASSIVE PARTICIPLE 146
PERFECT TENSE PASSIVE 147
PLUPERFECT TENSE PASSIVE 147
FUTURE PERFECT TENSE PASSIVE 148
PERFECT SYSTEM PASSIVE SUMMARIZED 148
LEARNING THE FOURTH PRINCIPAL PART OF VERBS 148
THE INTERROGATIVE PRONOUN 151
INTERROGATIVE ADJECTIVE 154
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 155

Chapter 20 157

Fourth Declension; More about Ablatives

FOURTH DECLENSION NOUNS 157
ABLATIVE OF PLACE FROM WHICH AND SEPARATION 159
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 160

Chapter 21 161

Finishing Off the Passive Voice of the Present System

PRESENT SYSTEM OF THIRD AND FOURTH CONJUGATIONS VERBS 161
REVIEW OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM PASSIVE 162
DRILLS 164
SYNOPSIS 165
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 165

Chapter 22 167

Fifth Declension; Summary of Ablative Uses

THE FIFTH DECLENSION 167
ABLATIVE OF MANNER WITH AND WITHOUT CUM 168
SUMMARY OF ABLATIVES 168
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 169

Chapter 23 171

Participles

I: BASIC CONCEPTS OF LATIN PARTICIPLES 171
FORMATION OF LATIN PARTICIPLES 172
DRILLS ON PARTICIPLE MORPHOLOGY. 173
DEFECTIVE VERBS. 174
TRANSLATING THE PARTICIPLES: THE BASICS 175
II: THE SYNTAX OF THE PARTICIPLES 176
SYNOPSIS 180
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 181

Chapter 24 183

Ablative Absolute; Passive Periphrastic; Dative of Agent

REVIEW OF PARTICIPLES 183
THE ABLATIVE ABSOLUTE 183
THE ABLATIVE ABSOLUTE WITH THE VERB "BEING" 186
ABLATIVE ABSOLUTE: TRANSLATIONS 186
THE PASSIVE PERIPHRASTIC; DATIVE OF AGENT 187
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 188

Chapter 25 189

Infinitives; Indirect Statement

TENSES OF THE INFINITIVE: MORPHOLOGY 189
DRILLS 190
THE IDEA OF INDIRECT STATEMENT 191
THE ACCUSATIVE-INFINITIVE CONSTRUCTION. 192
DRILLS 194
TENSES OF INFINITIVES: RELATIVE TENSE 195
THE THIRD PERSON REFLEXIVE PRONOUN IN INDIRECT STATEMENT 197
DRILLS 197
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 198

Chapter 26 199

Making Comparisons

DEGREES OF ADJECTIVES 199
THE COMPARATIVE DEGREE OF ADJECTIVES 199
THE SUPERLATIVE DEGREE OF ADJECTIVES 200

DRILL 201
TRANSLATIONS OF THE COMPARATIVE AND SUPERLATIVE DEGREES 201
THE USE OF THE ADVERB QUAM OR THE ABLATIVE OF COMPARISON 202
THE POSSESSIVE PRONOUN 202
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 203

Chapter 27 205

Making Irregular Comparisons

ADJECTIVES WITH IRREGULAR STEMS 205
SUPERLATIVE DEGREE OF ADJECTIVES IN -R 208
SOME ADJECTIVES ENDING IN -LIS 209
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 210

Chapter 28 211

The Subjunctive I

FORMATION OF THE SUBJUNCTIVE, PRESENT TENSE 211
FIRST CONJUGATION 211
SECOND CONJUGATION 212
THIRD CONJUGATION 212
THIRD CONJUGATION I-STEMS 213
FOURTH CONJUGATION 213
THE JUSSIVE SUBJUNCTIVE 214
THE SUBJUNCTIVE IN PURPOSE CLAUSES 214
A FINAL WORD ABOUT SUBJUNCTIVES 216

Chapter 29 217

The Subjunctive II

FORMATION OF THE IMPERFECT SUBJUNCTIVE 217
SUBJUNCTIVE OF SUM AND POSSUM 220
THE RESULT CLAUSE 221
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 221

Chapter 30 223

The Subjunctive III; Sequence of Tenses

PERFECT SYSTEM SUBJUNCTIVE 223
FUTURE PERFECT INDICATIVE AND PERFECT SUBJUNCTIVE COMPARED 224
SYNOPSES OF VERBS 225

SEQUENCE OF TENSES 227
INDIRECT QUESTIONS. 229
OBSERVING SEQUENCE OF TENSE IN INDIRECT QUESTION. 230
DRILLS 232
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 232

Chapter 31 233

Cum with Subjunctive; Ferō

CUM AS A SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION 233
THE IRREGULAR VERB FERŌ, FERRE, TULĪ, LĀTUS 234
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 238

Chapter 32 239

Formation and Comparison of Adverbs; Volō, Mālō, Nōlō Proviso Clauses

ADVERBS 239
ADVERBS IN THE POSITIVE DEGREE 239
COMPARATIVE DEGREE OF ADVERBS 240
SUPERLATIVE DEGREE OF ADVERBS. 240
DRILLS 241
DEGREES OF ADVERBS FROM IRREGULAR ADJECTIVES 241
THE IRREGULAR VERB VOLŌ, VELLE, VOLUĪ,—- 243
THE RELATED IRREGULAR VERBS NŌLŌ AND MĀLŌ 245
MĀLŌ, MĀLLE, MĀLUĪ,—- 247
PROVISO CLAUSES 249
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 250

Chapter 33 251

Conditions

CONDITIONAL STATEMENTS IN ENGLISH. 251
CONDITIONAL STATEMENTS IN LATIN 252
REVIEW. 254
DRILLS 255
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 255

Chapter 34 257

Deponent Verbs; Ablative with Special Deponents

DEPONENT VERBS 257

DICTIONARY CONVENTION FOR DEPONENT VERBS 257
PARTICIPLES OF DEPONENT VERBS 259
INFINITIVES OF DEPONENT VERBS 260
SYNOPSES OF VERBS 260
FATEOR, FATĒRĪ, FASSUS SUM 262
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 263

Chapter 35 265

More Uses of the Dative

DATIVE WITH SPECIAL VERBS 265
DATIVE WITH COMPOUND VERBS 266
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 267

Chapter 36 269

Jussive Noun Clauses; Fiō

JUSSIVE NOUN CLAUSES 269
DRILLS 271
THE IRREGULAR VERB: FIŌ, FIERĪ 271
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 272

Chapter 37 273

The Verb Eō; Place and Time

IRREGULAR VERB EŌ 273
PLACE CONSTRUCTIONS 275
TIME CONSTRUCTIONS 277
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 278

Chapter 38 279

Relative Clauses of Characteristic

RELATIVE CLAUSE (REVISITED) 279
RELATIVE CLAUSE OF CHARACTERISTIC 279
DATIVE OF REFERENCE 280
SUPINES 281
VOCABULARY PUZZLES 282

Chapter 39 283

Gerund and Gerundive

THE GERUND 283

VOCABULARY PUZZLES 286

Chapter 40 287

More about Questions; Clauses after Verbs of Fearing

QUESTIONS IN LATIN 287
NUM, NŌNNE IN QUESTIONS 287
FEAR CLAUSES 288
DRILLS 289

Key 291

Answers to Selected Exercises

CHAPTER 1 291
CHAPTER 2 291
CHAPTER 3 292
CHAPTER 5 293
CHAPTER 7 294
CHAPTER 9 294
CHAPTER 12 295
CHAPTER 14 296
CHAPTER 15 297
CHAPTER 16 297
CHAPTER 17 297
CHAPTER 18 298
CHAPTER 21 299
CHAPTER 23 299
CHAPTER 25 300
CHAPTER 26 302
CHAPTER 27 302
CHAPTER 30 303
CHAPTER 32 303
CHAPTER 33 304
CHAPTER 34 305
CHAPTER 36 306
CHAPTER 39 306
CHAPTER 40 307

1

Getting Started: Verbs

VERBS: THE BASICS

What is a verb? (This isn't a trick question). Think back to your 9th grade grammar class. You might remember this lapidary sentence from your childhood: *A verb is an action word*. Despite its simplicity, this definition of a verb isn't a bad place to start. A verb is a kind of a word, and it very often indicates an action. We need add only one refinement to have a good working definition of a verb that'll get you on your way to learning Latin. In addition to indicating an action, a verb can also indicate just a state of being where there isn't much (or any) action going on.

In this sentence, *the horse ate his oats*, the verb is *ate* and clearly this is an action. Now look at another sentence: *George was six feet tall*, the verb is *was* and nothing is really going on. The verb in this sentence is telling you that George is six feet tall. George isn't doing anything. So, for now, our definition of a verb is a word that indicates an action or state of being.

Fine. Now let's take a step into a little more complexity. Sometimes you'll see English indicating the action or state of being with a cluster of words instead of just one word. Consider the ideas of action or state of being that are indicated in these sentences: *This* **would have been** *helpful, I* ***was looking*** *at my horse, You* ***have seen*** *this before*. So where are the verbs? Let's consider. In each of these examples, you can see that there's really only one action or state of being that's indicated in these sentences. In the first, the basic verbal idea is that of existence. In the second, the verbal idea is that of looking. And in the third, the verbal idea is that of seeing.

But the sentences depict the verbal ideas in ways that are more complicated than can be expressed with just one word. The basic verbal idea needs to be qualified, or helped out, with additional words. These extra words are called *helping* or *auxiliary* verbs. (I'll call them auxiliary verbs, from the Latin word *auxilium* which means *help*.) In the second sentence, *I* ***was looking*** *at my horse*, the core of the verbal idea is *look*, but in this sentence the speaker wants it to be in the past, so he/she puts the auxiliary verb *was* in front of *look* and then even adds the ending *-ing* to the form *look*. In the third sentence, *you* ***have seen*** *this before,* the basic verb is *see*. The speaker adds the auxiliary verb *have* to put it into the past, and uses a slightly different form of the verb *see*, *seen*, because that's what the grammar of English calls for in that position.

Is this clear? A basic verbal idea is modified to fit into the sentence, and English modifies its verb according to its own rules, according to its own grammar: *I see, I do see, I am seeing, I will see, I was seeing, I saw, I have seen, I have been seen, I would have seen,* and so on. This modification of a verb to show different aspects or conditions

of the action is called *conjugation* (*kahn juh GAY chion*); and a verb is said to *conjugate* (*KAHN juh gate*) when it's modified to exhibit these different conditions.

Collect your thoughts for a moment. Do you understand that verbs are words that indicate an action or state of being? Do you understand that verbs conjugate to express the different ways the action or state of being is to be understood in a sentence? Good. Now you're ready to think about Latin verbs.

LATIN VERBS: THE BASICS

For the most part, almost exclusively, Latin verbs conjugate by attaching things to the end. This is different from English, right, where conjugation is mainly achieved by putting words in front of the verb. Look at the Latin translation for the English verb *to see* in some of its forms:

	Singular		**Plural**	
1st	videō	*I see*	vidēmus	*we see*
2nd	vidēs	*you see*	vidētis	*you see*
3rd	videt	*he/she/it sees*	vident	*they see*

A quick note about pronouncing Latin may be in order at this point. We know two things about the way ancient Latin would have sounded: (1) we don't know exactly what it sounded like, and (2) if it sounded like modern Italian or church Latin, the Roman grammarians who first wrote Latin down were out of their minds. Just listen to your teacher and imitate what you hear. If you're working independently, you can go to the book's Web site, www.languages.uncc.edu/classics/Wheelock, and listen to RealAudio sound files for some extra work.

So what's changing and what's staying the same in the Latin verb? You should be able to see that there's a part of the Latin verb that's staying the same, which has variable endings added to it. You should also be able to deduce what these endings are signifying. But what does all this mean? What's meant by the *1st*, *2nd*, and *3rd* off to the left?

Let's look at the numbers to the left first. Any time language takes place, there are two necessary participants. There is the one who is speaking, and there's the one to whom the speech is directed. There's a performer, and there's an audience. In the technical vocabulary of grammar, we call these *person*. The word *person* was a good choice. It means literally *through-sound* (*per-sona*), from the Latin word *persōna*, which means, among other things, a character in a play. So if you imagine that language is a kind of performance, you can see how the people involved in it could be the actors. The one who is the primary orientation around which the speech takes place is called the 1st person. The speaker refers to himself as *I* in English. If the speaker is identifying himself with a group, then that's considered to be a 1st person plural. English uses the word *we* for this.

The perceived audience, the one to whom the speech is directed, is called the 2nd person, and in English it's represented with the word *you*. When the 2nd person is plural, standard English again uses the word *you*. That is, English makes no *formal* distinction between the singular and the plural. (The American southern *y'all*, as useful as it could be, is not yet considered to be standard.)

It is also possible that these two participants, the1st and 2nd person, are talking about something or someone who's not there or who's not seen as one of the two necessary actors in speaking: the speaker and the audience. That's called the *third* person, and English uses the words *he, she*, *it*, or *they*, if it's plural.

I could go on and on about this concept of person. It's actually quite interesting, but let's keep it simple for now. Here's what you should know about person to get through the first chapter: Latin puts something at the end of the verb to change the person of the verb. We call these endings, surprisingly enough, *personal endings*. Here they are:

	Singular		**Plural**	
1st	**-ō**	*I*	**-mus**	*we*
2nd	**-s**	*you*	**-tis**	*you*
3rd	**-t**	*he/she/it*	**-nt**	*they*

Now try your hand at changing the person and number of a few other Latin verbs. The verb meaning *warn, advise* in Latin has the stem **monē-**, and the verb meaning *owe, ought* in Latin has the stem **dēbē-**. So have a look at these forms and translate them into English.

Latin	**English**	**Latin**	**English**
dēbēmus		monet[1]	
dēbētis		monēs	
dēbent		moneō	

CONJUGATIONS OF LATIN VERBS

You now know the single most important characteristic of Latin verbs: they conjugate by adding suffixes to a stem. You also now know the most common kind of suffix of verbs: the personal ending. Next you need to know something more about the stems.

The Latin equivalent for the English *see* has the stem **vidē-**, to which you add the personal endings. Notice that the last letter of the stem is a vowel; it's **-ē-**. This is called its stem vowel, or its thematic vowel. It's the vowel that shows up before

[1] You may be wondering why the **-ē-** is short before the personal ending. It just happens that Latin didn't like to have long vowels before a final **-t**, **-nt**, or **-ō**.

the personal endings. Not all Latin verbs have the **-ē-** as its thematic or stem vowel. There are four groups of Latin verbs, called *conjugations*, determined by the vowel that appears at the end of the stem. The verbs you've been working with have stems that end in **-ē**. Verbs whose stems end in **-ē** are called *second conjugation* verbs. If the stem of the verb ends in **-ā**, then it's called a *first conjugation* verb. Verbs whose stems end in short **-e** are called *third conjugation*, and verbs whose stems end in **-ī** are called *fourth conjugation*. Look at the following examples:

Conjugation:	**1st**	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**
Stem:	laudā-	valē-	agĕ-	venī-

You have worked already with second conjugation verbs. Now let's have a look at an example of a first conjugation verb. The stem of the Latin verb that means *love* is **amā-**. To conjugate it, we add the personal endings, following the same rules that apply to second conjugation verbs. Fill in the stem and personal endings in the blanks on the following chart but hold off filling in the conjugated forms for now.

	Stem	**Personal Ending**	**Conjugated Form**
Singular			
1st			
2nd			
3rd			
Plural			
1st			
2nd			
3rd			

If you follow the rules of conjugation that apply for second conjugation verbs, you should write the form **amaō** for the first person singular. But listen to how easily the two vowels **ā** and **ō** can be simplified into a single **ō** sound. Say **āō** several times quickly and you'll see how similar these two sounds are. Over time, Latin simplified the sound **āō** to just **ō**. The final written form therefore is **amō**, not **amāō**. That might appear to be an exception to the rule which says you should add the personal ending to the stem. But if you remember how similar the two sounds are, you'll see that it's still trying to follow the rule. So write **amō** for *I love*. Aside from this small irregularity, however, the personal endings are attached directly to the stem without any alteration or loss of the stem vowel. Complete the table above and compare it to the one that appears in Wheelock, Chapter 1. (See note 1 above for the rules about the long marks.)