

WORD HISTORIES

100 Latin Words that shaped English

FROM ANCIENT ROMAN ROOTS
TO MODERN LANGUAGE

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Published by Highdale Press, London.

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ISBN 978-1-0667214-0-5 (paperback edition)

ISBN 978-1-0667214-1-2 (eBook edition)

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Samples from other books in the '100 Words' series

Introduction

There are many reasons to learn about Latin words and the role they play in the English language.

Understand English better

You can understand complex and technical texts more easily if you are aware of the Latin words often used in professional, legal and business contexts.

Learn about the history of languages

The core vocabulary of English is drawn from Old English, the language of the Anglo-Saxons. But through the Norman invasion and the importing of French words, and later through the renaissance and its borrowing of Latin and Greek words, English has developed a rich vocabulary that goes far beyond its Germanic roots.

Knowing the Latin words in English helps to show the links between English and French and other Romance languages. Understanding how word-loans shape the English language can help you to see the connection to many other languages from around the world that English has borrowed from – from Hindi, Persian, Arabic, Nahuatl, Chinese and many more. Some of these (like Persian) are featured in other books in the Word Histories series.

Improve your communication skills in English

There are many occasions in life when you want to make the best impression on the people you are with.

- When you are conversing with important contacts, you want to impress them with your eloquence and knowledge.
- When you give a presentation you want to impress the audience with the depth of your expertise and education.
- When you write a business report, you want to impress your readers with persuasive language that spurs them to action.

Of course you already have the best ideas for your conversation, presentation or report, but do you have the best language? Can you tailor your language to the audience or the reader? Can you impress them with a highly educated and sophisticated vocabulary, so they take more notice of your message? This book can help. It aims to provide you with Latin-origin words that not only show you how English was shaped over time, but also will be helpful in your everyday communication.

A little background to Latin

What is Latin?

The language of the Romans, the language of the classical world, the language of art, culture, philosophy, law, medicine for over 2000 years. Even though the Roman Empire fell a long time ago (arguably in 410 AD, at least in the west), Latin continued to be a lingua franca across Europe and beyond for a further 1500 years. Until as recently as the 19th century it was commonly used as the common language for scientists and experts in law, medicine etc – until English took over.

Why is a knowledge of Latin words necessary today?

The English language has a massive vocabulary, by some estimates larger than any other living language. Part of the reason for this is that English is a mongrel tongue, a mixture of Germanic Anglo-Saxon words, French words (derived from Latin) and borrowings directly from Latin, Greek, Persian, Hindi and many other languages.

Understanding Latin roots allows you to decipher complex English words in medicine (*cardio-*), law (*habeas corpus*), and technology (*digital*).

When did we borrow these words?

Although Latin loan-words appear in Old English, the borrowings from Latin largely took place in the Renaissance, when the great flowering of knowledge, science, art and culture swept through Europe. People re-discovered ancient knowledge from the classical period, and found new ideas, new concepts, and new objects that needed to be named.

Anglo-Saxon period (449-1066)

Old English started the trend, by borrowing words to do with administration, law, education and because of their adoption of Christianity, such as *abbas* for ‘abbot’, *altare* for ‘altar’, *schola* for ‘school’, *magister* for ‘master’, and everyday words like *caseus* for ‘cheese’ and *vinum* for ‘wine’.

Middle Ages (1100–1450)

Middle English borrowed words to do with the church and religion such as *mea culpa*, *concupiscence*, *execrable*.

The Renaissance (1450–1650)

Early Modern English borrowed words to do with chivalry, rhetoric and discovery such as *alacrity*, *grandiloquent*, *peregrinate*

The Enlightenment (1650–1830)

Modern English borrowed words to do with science, logic and philosophy such as *tabula rasa*, *species*, *reductio ad absurdum*, *ex nihilo*

The Victorian Era (1830–1900)

Words to do with law, bureaucracy and medicine such as *ultra vires*, *post mortem*, *modus operandi*, *locus standi*, *rigor mortis*

In borrowing Latin words, they used the original Latin form but slightly modified in sound and shape to fit the modern languages (in this case English) they were borrowed into.

These words are still in use, even though in English we may also have Germanic-origin word with a similar meaning. Latin words seem more educated, often more precise, and lend a higher status to your communication.

In many cases we have kept both words, so we have pairs or 'doublets' with slightly different meanings:

English / Latin-based doublets

see	perceive
ask	enquire
come	arrive
break	damage
buy	purchase
right	correct
belief	faith
flee	escape
answer	reply
folk	people
worthy	valuable
home	residence
last	final

Why we "borrowed" Latin words

Germanic English was great for daily life (eat, sleep, fight), but Latin provided the complex words of more recent technology and professional development needed for surgery, law, and complex logic.

It was partly for prestige- for centuries, using Latin-derived words signalled that the speaker was part of the "educated elite."

Scientific neutrality also played a part. In science, using Species or Genus names based on Latin allowed researchers from different countries to communicate without using "local" names for plants and animals.

When do we use Latin in modern life?

For centuries people larded their discourse with Latin words to show their elite education, to gain prestige and status.

Now we use the words partly because they were ‘imported’ to describe something we didn’t have a precise word for, but also for the same reason of wishing to seem sophisticated.

In the law and politics we use *habeas corpus*, *persona non grata*, *ultra vires*, *pro bono*. In science and academia we use *post mortem*, *cum laude*, *non sequitur*, *placebo*, *ibid*, *op.cit*.

In business and professional life we use *quorum*, *per capita*, *quid pro quo*, *pro rata*.

Horses for courses - choosing the right word

It’s all about choosing the right word for the situation, and to create the right tone.

So we use **Egregious** when an error is so big it stands out from the crowd of errors

We use **Equanimity** when someone stays calm under pressure

We use **Inexorable** when a process (like aging or technology) cannot be stopped or slowed

We use **Meticulous** when someone is so careful they act out of "fear" (*metus*) of making a mistake.

There ‘s no right and wrong way – above all, you should use the Latin words to make your communication more interesting, more creative, more fun.

About The Book

Contents

This book contains 100 of the best high-value Latin words you can use in your life and work to impress your audience.

These words are from the high end of the language market – sophisticated, educated, intellectual, words that mark you out as a person of value. They give you the sheen of an Oxford or Harvard education – without the high cost of tuition.

All these words are used in English but are drawn from Latin, one of the classical languages that have given so many complex words to English (see our companion books in the series on **100 Greek Words**, **100 Persian Words...**).

People will be impressed that you know these words – even if they are not so sure how to use (or spell) the words themselves...

Structure

The book is arranged like a dictionary, with the words in alphabetical order.

Each entry gives you:

- The word in English
- Its current meaning in English
- The origins of the Latin word and what it meant before we borrowed it
- An explanation of how and when it is used
- A sample sentence using the word
- A quotation using the word, taken from literary, journalistic or formal business sources.

At the end there is an index of topics that you might need the words for – like business, reports, the arts, law etc., which cross-references with the words in the dictionary, to help you quickly find the appropriate word to use for a particular purpose.

There is also a Further Reading section suggesting other books to take you on a deeper reading journey through Latin, its history and its words.

A fortiori

A phrase used in logic to refer to a stronger argument than the one just mentioned. If one thing is true, then a second more obvious thing must also be true.

Origins

From Latin *fortis* (strong), First used in medieval Latin legal and scholastic argumentation, it passed into English legal and philosophical prose to mark inference from a stronger case.

Usage

This is used to denote a stronger argument than the one already discussed or accepted. It's common in legal arguments and philosophical debates to "double down" on a point.

If we know or agree that one thing is true, then the next thing is even more true - similar to the use of 'all the more true'.

If A is true, then B is all the more true.

If you can't walk, then a fortiori you cannot go jogging.

If you can't speak English well, then a fortiori you cannot pass this exam.

Context

If the company cannot afford a new office, a fortiori it cannot afford a private jet.

Quotation

"If the universe has no divine author, it could never have had any purpose... and, *a fortiori*, it cannot have been created for us." Thomas Henry Huxley, Hume, 1879.

"Now if a man be not too old for it when he is dying, *a fortiori* he cannot be too old for it at any previous time." Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Brother Copas, 1911

Bellicose

Aggressive or warlike behaviour; demonstrating aggression and a willingness to fight.

Origins

From Latin *bellicosus* (warlike) from *bellum* (war). Bellicose was borrowed in the early 15th century, during the Hundred Years' War between England and France. English already had the word 'warlike', but some writers wanted a more learned, higher status word to describe the aggressive nature of soldiers and kings.

Usage

The term has a negative connotation and used to be applied more frequently to nations or politicians who seemed to be favouring war or about to declare war. It was a term of disapprobation - used by those against war, not used by those in favour of it.

This term is less used in politics than it used to be, though the world is no less bellicose than it was.

The same Latin root is found in the US word 'antebellum', literally 'before the war'. It is used to refer to the calm days before the American Civil War, the days of what some thought was a 'golden age' of peaceful life in the South. Pleasant for some, perhaps, but of course very oppressive for others.

Context

A bellicose tone crept into the debate.

The ambassador's bellicose tone alarmed the assembly.

The dictator's bellicose rhetoric toward neighbouring nations sparked fears of an imminent invasion.

Quotation

"The bellicose nations stood on the brink of war, each unwilling to back down." Sun Tzu;

"The bellicose nations invite war." Winston Churchill, speech, House of Commons (1936).

Bona fide

This means "in good faith." It describes something that is genuine, real, sincere, and without intention to deceive.

Origins

From Latin bona fides (in good faith). The opposite is mala fide (in bad faith).

Usage

This unmodified phrase is the Latin for 'good faith'; it is used to show that a person, or an institution or idea, can be trusted as correct, truthful, not deceiving.

It's often used as an adjective for "the real deal."

The plural noun *bona fides* is also used, meaning 'good intentions, sincerity, identity'.

If people are asked to prove their 'bona fides', they need to prove their identity or who they represent. This is still used, especially in American English, but this seems to have dropped out of regular circulation in British English.

Context

The university requires a bona fide reason for a student to miss the final exam. I only give money to bona fide causes.

Quotation

"I have no notion of loving people by halves; it is not my nature. My attachments are always

bona fide." Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 1817.

"He's a bona fide Invisible Man—and he's in my house." H.G. Wells *The Invisible Man*, 1897

Bona vacantia

Ownerless goods; unclaimed property, and from that the principle that unclaimed property should become the property of the state.

Origins

From Latin *bona* / *bonus* (goods/property) and *vacantia* (vacant/empty).

Bona vacantia is a legal concept that entered English in the 16th century and the common law in the 18th century. Whenever a subject died without heirs, their property became 'vacant goods' and reverted to the Crown.

Usage

A term little-used outside the law, this means that something has been 'vacated' or abandoned by its presumed owner, and so can be passed on or taken over or claimed by the state.

It is a medieval concept, originally to provide income from the King, but it is still legally the case today that property can be seized. Ownerless assets in the UK or Commonwealth often revert to the government under this ancient Latin title.

Context

When the corporation dissolved without distributing its remaining land, the assets were declared bona vacantia.

Quotation

"The doctrine of bona vacantia rests upon the principle that there is no property without an owner." Halsbury's Laws of England.

Caducity

Frailty or perishability; the state of being transient or impermanent, especially relating to old age, thus senility

Origins

From Latin *caducus* (falling), from *cadere* (to fall), used in English from the 17th century onwards.

Usage

The word caducity arrived in the mid-18th century, largely as a technical term for botanists and physicians. It describes the tendency of things—leaves, teeth, or even civilizations—to fall away or decay. It became a favourite term for writers like Edward Gibbon, who used it to describe the "falling" state of the Roman Empire, suggesting that historical decline was as inevitable as the decaying of living things.

This is a fairly obscure and rarely used word nowadays, but we include it because it is such a beautiful word. Impress your friends by dropping it into the conversation - 'today I feel the caducity of my life'.

Context

The poet lamented the caducity of youth, noting how quickly the vigour of life fades into memory.

Quotation

"The caducity of the body is a daily monitor of the soul's immortality." Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals* (1716). "The caducity of his physical frame was evident, yet his mind remained sharp." *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon.

Captious

Apt to find petty faults; designed to entrap or confuse in argument; it describes a person who is overly critical and trying to find fault too easily, raising petty objections.

Origins

From *captiosus* (fallacious) from *captio* (a trick/seizing), from *capere* (to take/seize). 'Captious' was borrowed in the late 14th century, originally appearing in theological debates.

Usage

A lovely adjective that describes someone's way of arguing or debating as petty and annoying. A captious argument is implied to be one that is wrong but also petty, silly, a way of scoring points rather than contributing to a discussion.

It was originally used to describe a person - a captious opponent. This was someone who in argumentation ignored the heart of an issue to seize upon a minor verbal error, an annoying habit that we can find in social media discussions today.

Context

He torpedoed progress with his captious objections.

The critic's captious review overlooked the film's deeper virtues.

Quotation

"He was a captious critic, ready to find flaws where none existed." George Henry Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature* (1865).

Contumacious

Referring to a person it means stubbornly disobedient or rebellious; headstrong and wilfully contemptuous of authority.

Origins

It comes from Latin *contumacia* (haughtiness) from *contumax* (haughty), perhaps from *com-* (together, but an intensifier) and *tumere* (to swell as in "swelling with pride").

Usage

It's a pity that this term is now less commonly used because it is a delicious word that can be deployed to describe a person who is behaving badly, wilfully, and generally being a pain in the bottom.

More formally, it remains in use mainly in legal circles and can describe actions that show contempt of court, and can also be used in political contexts where rebels resist the state's authority.

Context

The witness remained contumacious in court and was fined.

The contumacious witness refused to answer the judge's questions.

Quotation

"He was contumacious, refusing to obey even the mildest injunction." Sir Edward Coke, *Reports* (1600). "His contumacious spirit made him a hero to the rebels but a villain to the crown." *Historical Records of the Rebellion*.

Cui bono?

Literally 'to whom a benefit?' Used to pose the question about an action - to whose benefit is this action or event? A principle used in legal and criminal investigations to suggest that the person who benefits from a crime is likely the one who committed it.

Origins

From Latin *cui* (to whom) and *bono* (good/benefit). It's a Latin phrase used originally by the orator and writer Cicero. This phrase was popularized in English legal and political circles in the early 17th century, largely through the translation of Roman histories and the works of figures like Sir Edward Coke.

Usage

Known as the detective's maxim, this is a rhetorical question to establish the motive for a crime or action. It's a Latin legal maxim (to whose benefit?) taken into English legal and political commentary.

The phrase is said to originate with the Roman judge Lucius Cassius, and was popularised by the orator Cicero (80 BCE). Borrowed into English it later became a "detective's maxim" used to see who might benefit from a crime and thus have a motive to commit the crime.

In politics and business it can also be used somewhat cynically. It can be used to question the motives and intentions of someone, as in 'he is supporting a change in the law, but cui bono?' This suggests the supporter will benefit from the change and his support is self-serving. A politician might use this phrase to try and expose the hidden financial interests behind a rival's proposed legislation.

Context

In investigating the corporate sabotage, the detective asked, "Cui bono?" and looked at the company's main competitor.

If a journalist has a story that comes from a leak in parliament, it's important to ask, cui bono?

Quotation

"Cui bono? is the first question a detective should ask." *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Arthur Conan Doyle.

Demur

Raise doubts or show reluctance; to hesitate because something is unacceptable; to have an objection, make a protest.

Origins

From Latin *demorari* (to linger/delay), from *de-* (away) and *morari* (to delay). First recorded in the 1630s in legal contexts.

Usage

This verb should not be confused with the adjective 'demure', which describes the manner of a shy, charming person. It means to disagree or object to a proposition - albeit very politely.

It originally entered English in the 14th century via Anglo-French to mean "to stay or linger", but developed a legal meaning. In the medieval courtroom, to "demur" meant a defendant agreed with the facts presented but challenged whether those facts were sufficient to sustain a legal claim. By the 17th century, the word moved from the courtroom to common conversation, describing anyone who "lingered" or hesitated or showed reluctance before agreeing to a proposal.

Notice it doubles the -r- in the past tense - he demurred.

Context

She demurred when asked to sign the contract immediately. He demurred politely, declining the offer.

Normally she would agree to any request, but this time she felt she had to demur on ethical grounds.

Quotation

"I demur to that statement, for it goes beyond the evidence." Sir William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England (1765).

"To this proposition the council was inclined to demur, fearing the cost of the expedition." The History of England, David Hume.

Desuetude

A state of disuse or inactivity, or obsolescence; the condition of no longer being used or practiced.

Origins

From Latin *desuetudo* (disuse) from *de* + *suescere* (to become accustomed to something). It arrived in the 17th century as a specialized legal term to explain ancient statutes (like the requirement to practice archery on Sundays) that were never repealed, but simply fell into desuetude.

Usage

This is what some would call an extravagant word, a complex word for a simple meaning - namely that something has become disused or been abandoned.

It's not widely used, except in legal contexts, referring to forgotten laws no longer applied. I don't think I have ever heard it being used in conversational speech, but it can enliven a written text with a formal and learned stylistic addition, and is usually collocated with 'fallen into', thus 'fallen into desuetude'...

Context

The law fell into desuetude after decades of neglect.

The canal has fallen into desuetude.

The ancient law against grazing sheep on the town common had long since fallen into desuetude.

Quotation

"The law had fallen into desuetude, remembered only by scholars." Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., *The Common Law* (1881).

"The custom of duelling has fortunately fallen into desuetude in most civilized nations." *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, William Blackstone.

About the Author



Michael Carrier is a linguist and author of books on language history and language usage. He has written a number of language education textbooks, and over 40 academic papers.

He studied language and historical linguistics at the University of Cambridge and has a Masters in Applied Linguistics.

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100 Greek words that shaped English

The English language is essentially a Germanic house decorated with a massive collection of Greek marble. While many Greek words entered English through Latin during the Renaissance, others were "coined" by scientists and philosophers to describe concepts that previously had no name. Using Greek-origin words always elevates your discourse.

<https://highdale.org>

100 Persian words that shaped English

English owes a surprising debt to Persian. Because of the Silk Road and the later British presence in India, many Persian words travelled through Greek, Latin, or Hindi before landing in English. These words often carry a sense of exoticism, antiquity, or high-level craftsmanship.

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Dictionary of American cultural reference

1620-2000

This dictionary explains some of the thousands of cultural references to American life and history that you come across when reading about the USA. It contains 1000 references - it could be 10,000, of course – this is only a selection.

The basic criteria for the selection are that we want to include what a non-American might need to know when reading American books, magazines, newspapers, listening to American podcasts or watching American films and videos.

These are the cultural references to people, places, events, history, institutions etc. that non-locals might not know about.

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