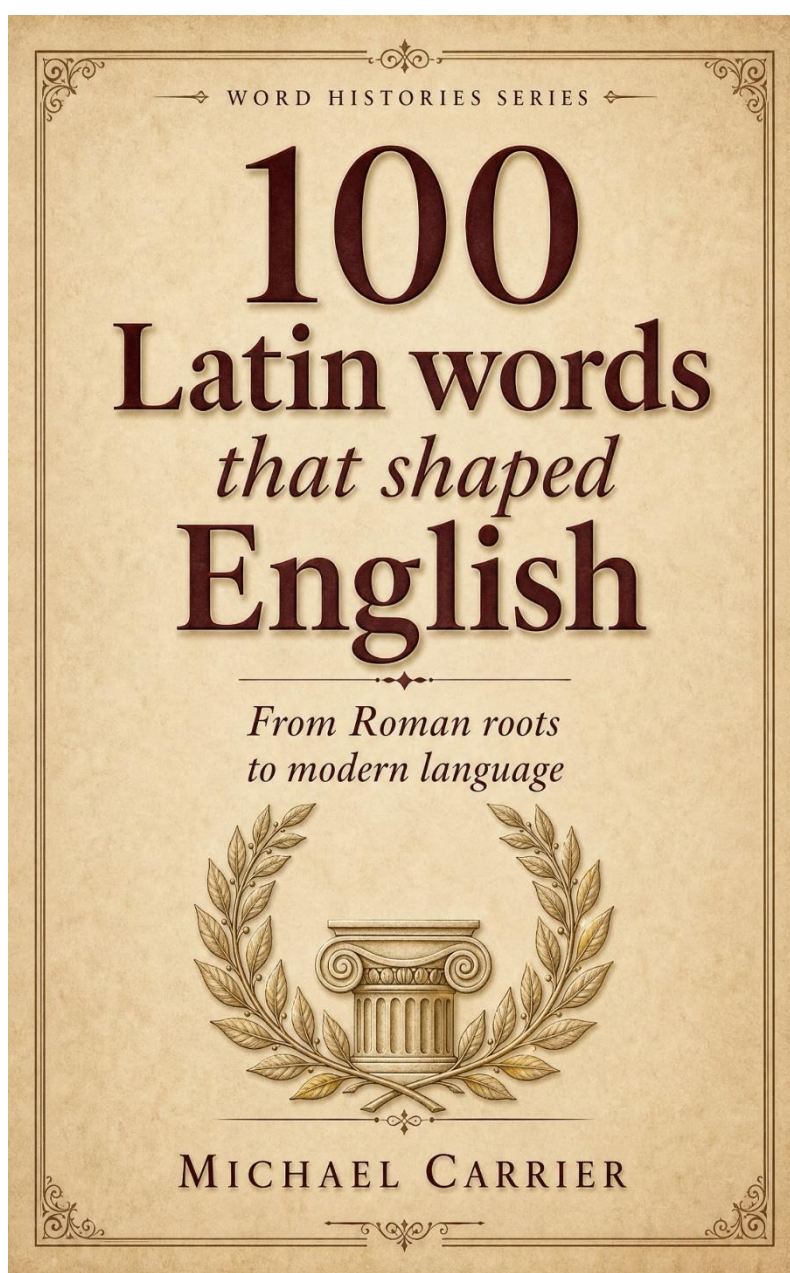


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100 Latin words that shaped English



An A-Z guide to 100 of the Latin words that we still use today, embedded in our English language. Each word is shown with its Latin root, its modern meaning, examples of use, and its backstory – what are its ancient roots and how did it come to English? It explains why we have pairs of words like *right* and *correct*, *see* and *perceive*, *home* and *residence*.

The story of these words is part of the history of English – we have borrowed and stolen words from many different languages around the world. This makes English a rich language with so many subtle shades of meaning, giving us a broad choice of words to choose from and the chance to express multiple nuances.

Sample items in the Dictionary

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.