

Why Study Latin?

New figures show that the demand for Latin Teachers outstrips supply. We shouldn't be surprised.

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[Who'd want to study Latin?](#) A dead language, good only for Caesar attacking the ditch with arrows (an old Molesworth joke) or honking like a pig as you decline your pronouns (hic haec hoc; hunc hanc hoc). Well, here's a simple, utilitarian point: because Latin is a dead language, because it is taught to be read, not spoken, because it is taught entirely through its grammatical rules not through its demotic use, as you learn it you gain an understanding of the mechanics and structure of language streets ahead of any you will gain from the study of a modern tongue. Any other language - not just Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, but German, Russian, Arabic - becomes easier for a child with a grounding in Latin. A student can use Latin to grasp the bones and sinews of any language.

What else? Children learning it will quickly start to read the great classics of Latin literature. After a couple of years, Catullus and Martial. After three, Virgil, Pliny, Ovid, Cicero. Soon come Horace, Lucretius, Tacitus. This is tough, uncompromisingly difficult stuff - but also offers entry into an astonishing world, a lost world that paradoxically offers itself up vividly and excitingly through its literature. These great writers lie at the head of a western tradition in writing that enfolds Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Eliot, Heaney. To be a good reader of English and Irish literature alone, knowledge of the literature of the Romans offers an inestimable advantage.

The most frequent charge laid against the door of Latin - aside from the absurd accusation of elitism - is that it is useless. Why not learn Mandarin, people ask, or Russian or French? For me the pleasure of Latin is precisely because - aside from the points sketched above - it is "useless". Latin doesn't help to turn out factory-made mini-consumers fit for a globalised 21st-century society. It helps create curious, intellectually rigorous kids with a rich interior world, people who have the tools to see our world as it really is because they have encountered and imaginatively experienced another that is so like, and so very unlike, our own.

- Charlotte Higgins is the author of [Latin Love Lessons](#) and *It's All Greek to Me* (Short Books).

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