An introduction to Latin nouns and cases

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The LATIN QVARTER

What is a noun?

A noun is a 'thing'. It may be a living thing like *rabbit* or *teacher*, or something inanimate like *rock* or *chocolate*. It may be something you can see or touch like *cheese* or *water*, or something less concrete like happiness or *pain* (called 'abstract' nouns). Names are nouns too (*John, London, Himalayas*), called 'proper' nouns, recognizable by their capital letters.

A noun often has 'the' or 'a(n)' in front of it, e.g. *a table, an apple, the Simpsons*. This is not always so with names, e.g. we do not say 'the London'.

These nouns, these 'things', are the building blocks of language.

What is a verb?

If nouns are the people or the things or the places which appear in a sentence, there has to be a word describing what the nouns are doing or what is happening to them, an action word of some kind, like *eat, see, chase*. These words are called verbs. Verbs are where the action is.

taurus agricolam fugat

Q1   Noun or verb?

taurus   _____
agricolam   _____
fugat   _____

taurus/taurum *bull*
agricola/agricolam *farmer*
fugat *chases/ is chasing*

Subjects and objects

The two nouns in the sentence **taurus agricolam fugat** have different relationships with the verb: **taurus** is doing the chasing, **agricolam** is on the receiving end of this action, he is being chased.

The noun 'doing the action' of the verb is the subject of the verb, the noun on the receiving end of this action, the one 'done to', is the object.
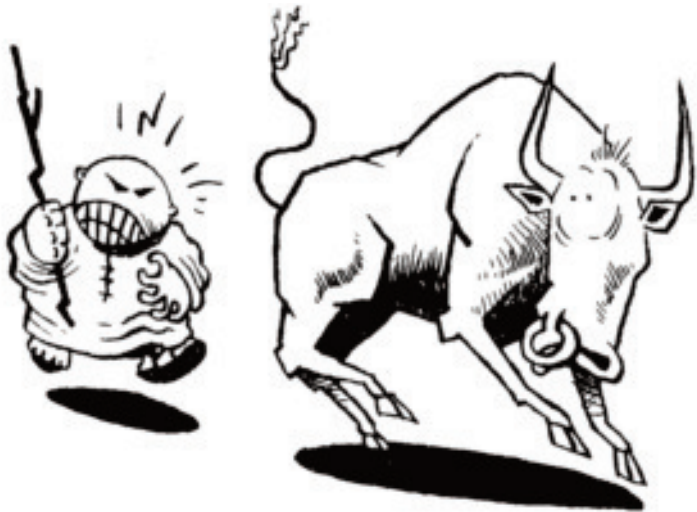

Q2 Subject or object?

taurus agricolam fugat

taurus   _____

agricolam   _____

Subjects and objects: swapping roles

Now **agricola** is the subject, the one doing the chasing, and **taurum** is the object, the one chased, the Latin sentence has changed only slightly. The word-order is the same, but look at the word-endings.

taurum agricola fugat

Q3   **Add the Latin nouns, with their subject or object endings:**

	subject	object
farmer	_____	_____
bull	_____	_____

Word order

In English it is the word order which tells you who is the subject and object. Typically the subject comes first, then the verb, then the object: 'the farmer chases the bull'. If we swap subject and object and describe the bull chasing the farmer, then we alter the position of the two nouns in the sentence: 'the bull chases the farmer'.

In Latin the word-endings – and not the word order – which tell us who is doing it (subject) and who is done to (object). So the object could appear before the subject. In fact Latin word-order is much more flexible. The verb typically, but not always, comes at the end of a sentence or word-group.

By having the verb at the end it leaves an important part of a sentence to last, for that tells us what happens to the nouns in the sentence. Reading is an exercise in anticipation, and Roman readers/listeners would be predicting the verb (i.e. the action) as the sentence unravels. In English it is the object we predict (i.e. a noun):

> The boy smashed .... (the ball? the eggs? a pot?)

In Latin it is the verb, the action:

> The boy ...the ball .... (smashed, swallowed?)

The Latin subject generally comes first, then the object, then the verb. But this is not a fixed rule. The word-endings allow more flexibility.

taur**us** agricol**am** fugat

taur**um** agricol**a** fugat

	farmer	*woman*	*poet*	*beast*	*bull*	*god*	*master*	*slave*
Subject	agricola	fēmina	poēta	bēstia	taurus	deus	dominus	servus
Object	agricolam	fēminam	poētam	bēstiam	taurum	deum	dominum	servum

Q4   Fill the gaps with the right Latin nouns with the correct endings:

A macron over a vowel (fēmina) indicates that the vowel is 'long' as opposed to 'short' (no macron). The long version of a vowel is a more lingering sound than the short one.

1

_____ _____ fugat
the god   the slave

2

_____ _____ fugat
the poet   the woman

3

_____   _____ fugat
the beast   the master

4

_____   _____ fugat
the master   the beast

5

_____   _____ fugat
the god   the woman

Declensions

So far you have seen two patterns of nouns, those like **agricola** and those like **taurus**. Noun-groups are called declensions. The <u>first declension</u> includes all nouns like **agricola** and **fēmina**. The <u>second declension</u> includes nouns like **taurus** and **servus**.

The Cases

Latin is an 'inflected' language – i.e. words have endings which change depending on their grammatical function in the sentence.

A noun's word-ending for a particular function (i.e. subject, object, etc) is called a 'case'. The subject ending (indicating the 'doer') is called the 'nominative case', and the object ending (showing the 'done-to') is called the 'accusative case'. So **domin<u>us</u>** is in the nominative case, **domin<u>um</u>** in the accusative case, and so on.

English 'cases'

A few English words change their shape in a similar way. They are leftovers from Old English, the language of Alfred the Great and others who lived before the Norman Conquest of 1066. In those days English had cases like Latin (and like modern German, which shares a common ancestor with English). English nouns do not change to indicate subject or object; but pronouns do:

I/me   he/him   she/her   we/us   they/them

The nominative case

A noun in the nominative case is the subject of the verb. Names of people and places are known to us today by their nominative form (Catullus not Catullum, Britannia not Britanniam).

The accusative case

The accusative case is used for the object of the verb:

<p style="margin-left: 2em">agricola taurum fugat</p>

It is also used for an object of movement, a destination or goal of motion (into..., on to..., to..., towards...), usually with a preposition like **ad** (*to, towards*) or **in** (*into, on to*):

<p style="margin-left: 2em">agricola taurum in vīllam (<i>into the villa</i>) fugat</p>

Here there are two words in the accusative, the ordinary object **taurum**, and **vīllam** the goal of motion.

The 'object' of the verb *to be*

The verb **est** means *is*. The 'object' of **est** is not really an object at all. Nothing is 'done' to it. **Est** simply describes the subject, like an adjective does, e.g. *the farmer is <u>rich</u>, but the farmer is not <u>a god</u>*.

Thus the 'object' of the verb *to be* (called the complement) is in the same case as its subject, usually nominative:

agricola nōn deus est   *the farmer is not a god*

The genitive case

A noun in the genitive case can almost always be translated into English with the preposition 'of' in front of it:

> taurus **agricolae**   the bull **of the farmer**
> servus **dominī**   the slave **of the master**
> vīlla **fēminae**   the villa **of the woman**

One very common meaning of the genitive is the possessive. In all three examples above, the noun in the genitive owns the other noun. To translate the possessive genitive into English we often use the apostrophe (**the farmer's** bull, **the master's** slave, **the woman's** villa). The possessive apostrophe in English is what's left of the Old English genitive.

The Latin genitive, the 'of' case', can have other meanings too. Possession is only a part of the story – and there's a clue: 'a part **of the story**'. The genitive case can express the whole of which something is a part, the 'partitive' genitive, as in 'half **of the cake**', 'some **of the soldiers**', 'most **of the wine**', etc.

There is an ambiguity with the Latin genitive which is shared by the English equivalent: 'dislike of the farmer' could mean the farmer's dislike of something else or someone's dislike of him; likewise 'the story of the goddess' (in Latin as well as English) could mean either the story she tells or one told about her.

	1st declension			2nd declension		
	farmer	*woman*	*poet*	*bull*	*god*	*horse*
Nominative	agricola	fēmina	poēta	taurus	deus	equus
Accusative	agricolam	fēminam	poētam	taurum	deum	equum
Genitive	agricolae	fēminae	poētae	taurī	deī	equī

Q5   Fill the gaps:

1

poēta _____ _____ fugat
       the horse   of the woman
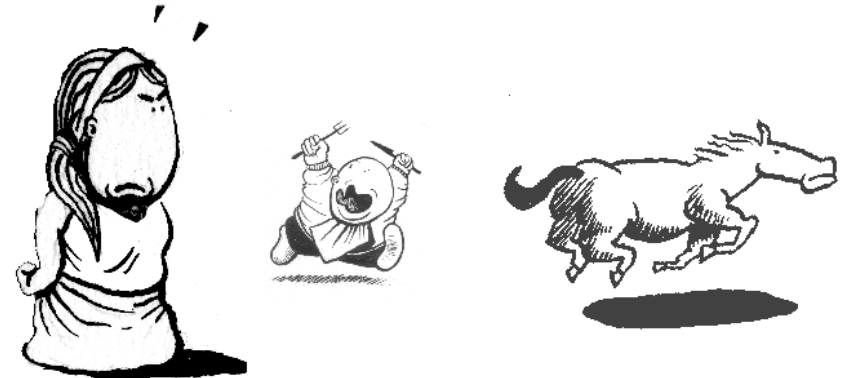
2

agricola _____ _____ fugat
          the bull   of the god

The dative case

The dative case is used for an 'indirect' object or secondary object, as in 'the farmer gives a bull **to the god**' or 'the woman shows the villa **to a friend**'. In each example there is an ordinary object ('bull', 'villa') and an indirect object ('god', 'friend'):

> **agricola taurum deō dat**   the farmer gives a bull **to the god**
> **fēmina vīllam amīcae ostentat**   the woman shows the villa **to a friend**

Used with the verb 'to be', the dative has a possessive meaning:

> **taurus dominō est**   there is a bull **for the master**
> **equus est fēminae***   there is a horse **for the woman**

* for 1st declension nouns the genitive and dative endings are the same (**-ae**)

If the genitive is the 'of' case, the dative is the 'to' or 'for' case.

The dative case used instead of the accusative for the object

Most verbs take an object in the accusative. A few verbs always have their ordinary object in the dative, e.g.

**imperat** (*s/he orders*), **parcit** (*s/he spares*), **pāret** (*s/he obeys*):

> **servus dominō pāret**   the slave obeys **the master**
> **fēmina poētae imperat**   the woman orders **the poet**
> **dominus servō parcit**   the master spares **the slave**

Where the dative is used for an object instead of the accusative there is often an imbalance of power: someone obeying or commanding, or doing a favour or performing a (dis)service of some kind for someone (dative).

	1st declension				2nd declension		
	mistress	*poet*	*water*		*bull*	*god*	*slave*
Nominative	domin**a**	poēt**a**	aqu**a**		taur**us**	de**us**	serv**us**
Accusative	domin**am**	poēt**am**	aqu**am**		taur**um**	de**um**	serv**um**
Genitive	domin**ae**	poēt**ae**	aqu**ae**		taur**ī**	de**ī**	serv**ī**
Dative	domin**ae**	poēt**ae**	aqu**ae**		taur**ō**	de**ō**	serv**ō**

Q6   Fill the gaps:

1

_____   _____   _____   dat
the poet   to the god   the bull   gives

2
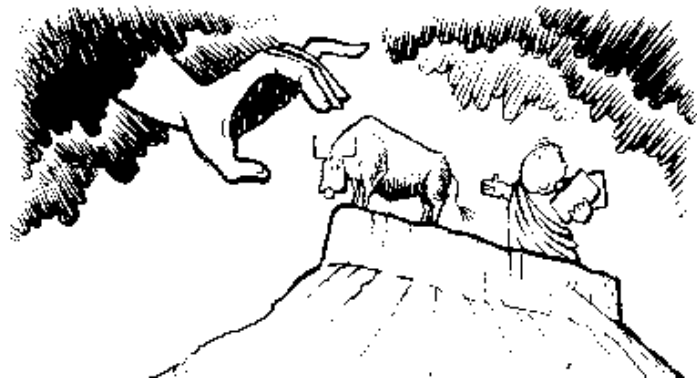
servus   _____   _____   apportat
the slave   water   for the mistress   brings

3

nōn   est   aqua   _____
there isn't water   for the slave
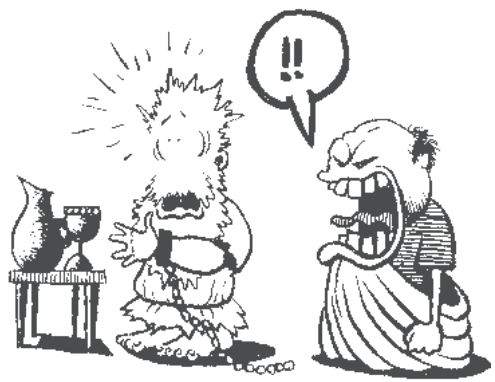
Gender

The gender of some nouns is obvious: **domina** is feminine and **taurus** masculine. However, <u>all</u> Latin nouns have gender, even inanimate ones like **aqua** (feminine) or **lectus** *couch* (masculine).

Most 1st declension nouns are feminine. By far the majority of 1st declension nouns, **aqua**, **domina**, etc, are <u>feminine</u>.

With even fewer exceptions, 2nd declension nouns like **deus** and **servus** are <u>masculine</u>.

There is a third gender, neither masculine nor feminine: <u>neuter</u> (the Latin for 'neither').

> **One or two of the 1st declension nouns you have met so far are not very representative, for they belong to the exceptions which are masculine: agricola and poēta are masculine.**

Neuter nouns

Below is shown **vīnum** (wine). It belongs to the 2nd declension, like **servus**, but it is neuter. Many of the endings are the same as for **servus**.

	1st declension	2nd declension	
	woman **(fem.)**	*slave* **(masc.)**	*wine* **(neuter)**
Nominative	fēmina	servus	vīnum
Accusative	fēminam	servum	vīnum
Genitive	fēminae	servī	vīnī
Dative	fēminae	servō	vīnō

> **One thing all neuter nouns share: the nominative and accusative endings are the same. This means a neuter noun's ending will not tell you whether it is the subject or the object. You have to work that out from the other words in the sentence.**
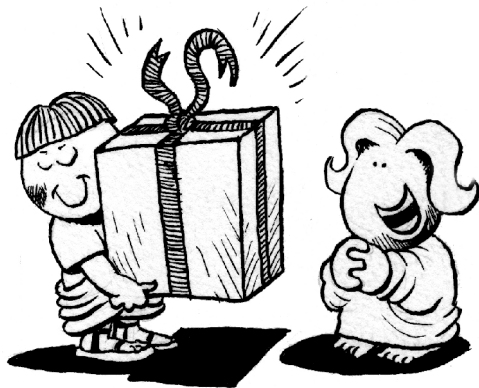
Some 2nd declension neuter nouns

	wine	*gift*	*hay*
Nominative	**vīnum**	**dōnum**	**faenum**
Accusative	**vīnum**	**dōnum**	**faenum**
Genitive	**vīnī**	**dōnī**	**faenī**
Dative	**vīnō**	**dōnō**	**faenō**

Q7 Fill the gaps:

1

agricola _____ _____ dat

           a gift   to the woman   gives

2

fēmina _____ _____ dat

      hay   to the horse   gives

Vocabulary exercise

Q8   Fill the gaps:

Feminine nouns (1st decl.)		Masculine nouns (2nd decl.)	
amīca	female friend	amīcus	....
	goddess	deus	....
domina	mistress	....	master
	daughter	fīlius	son
	(female) slave	servus	....

The ablative case

There are many prepositions which represent the ablative case in English: *in*, *on*, *at*, *with*, *by*, *from*, *out of*. The ablative case is used with a number of different <u>Latin</u> prepositions, e.g.:

A case for
Inspector
Clouseau

ā, ab	*by, from*
cum	*with, together with*
ē, ex	*out of, from*
in*	*in, on*

* **in** is also used with the accusative, when it means *into* or *on to* (goal of motion)

The ablative case is one which might be used a good deal by detectives trying to solve a mysterious murder. All the words in yellow could be in the ablative in Latin:

'He was last seen in the morning by the cook in the kitchen with the vicar and was then struck with a pot …'

The ablative may be used to show *when* or *where* something happens, or a point of departure:

fēmina in lectō sedet   the woman sits on the couch
agricola equum ē vīllā fugat   the farmer chases the horse out of the villa

**Similarly:**
At midnight he was set upon in the dark in the bathroom by the bishop armed with a hairdryer, with his friend who had escaped from the cupboard.

The ablative often describes *how* something happens: the instrument, method, manner or cause.

agricola taurum faenō nūtrit   the farmer feeds the bull with hay
poēta dominam dōnō dēlectat   the poet charms his mistress with a gift

The ablative is used to show *by whom* something is done:

agricola ā taurō territus est   the farmer was terrified by the bull

When 'with' means 'in company with' or 'together with', then **cum** usually appears with the ablative:

coquus in atriō <u>cum dominā</u> sedet   the cook is sitting in the atrium <u>with the mistress</u>

But if 'with' is describing the manner of something or the instrument or cause, then there is usually no preposition in Latin:

coquus, <u>vinō</u> ēbrius, in atriō sedet   the cook, drunk <u>with wine</u>, is sitting in the atrium

	1st declension	2nd declension masc.	2nd declension neuter
	jar	*tribune*	*whip*
Nominative	amphora	tribūnus	flagellum
Accusative	amphoram	tribūnum	flagellum
Genitive	amphorae	tribūnī	flagellī
Dative	amphorae	tribūnō	flagellō
Ablative	amphorā	tribūnō	flagellō

Q9   Fill the gaps:

1
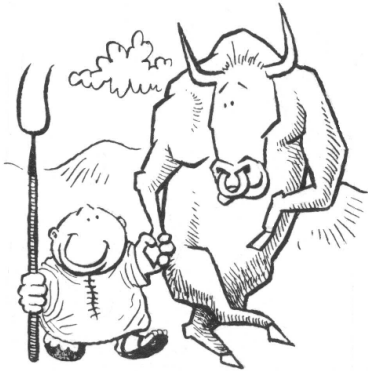
agricola   cum   _____   ambulat
the farmer   with   the bull   walks

2

agricola   _____   ēbrius est
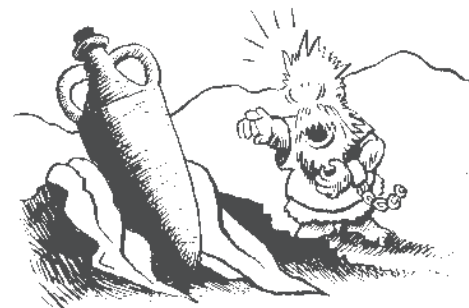the farmer   with wine   drunk   is

3
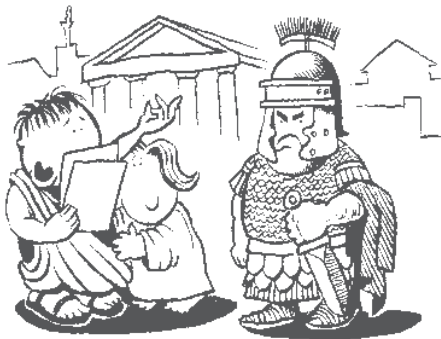
tribūnus   ā   _____   irrītātus est
the tribune   by   the poet   was irritated

4

amphora   _____ ā _____ vīsa est

a jar   of wine   by   the slave   was seen

5
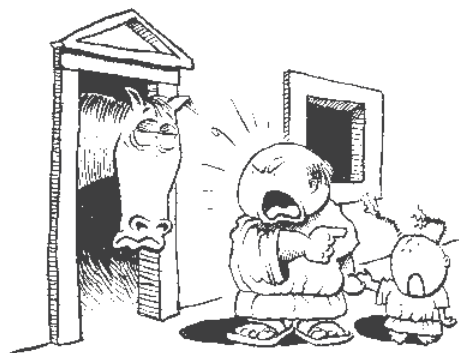
agricola   servum   _____ terret

the farmer   the slave   with the whip   frightens

6

poēta   ā   _____ comprehēnsus est

the poet   by   the tribune   was arrested

7

equus   in _____ _____ est

the horse   in   the villa   of the farmer   is

	1st declension		*2nd declension masc.*	*2nd declension neuter*
	girl	*villa*	*couch*	*amphitheatre*
Nominative	puella	vīlla	lectus	amphitheātrum
Accusative	puellam	vīllam	lectum	amphitheātrum
Genitive	puellae	vīllae	lectī	amphitheātrī
Dative	puellae	vīllae	lectō	amphitheātrō
Ablative	puellā	vīllā	lectō	amphitheātrō

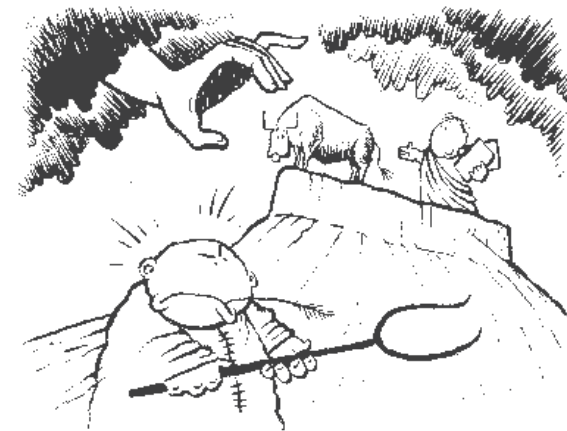**Q10   Fill the gaps:**

1
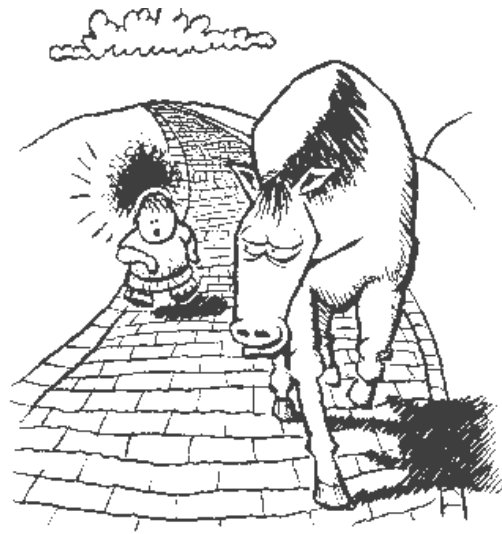
_____ _____ fugat
 the girl   the horse

2

poēta _____ _____ _____ dat
        the bull   of the farmer to the god gives

3

_____ in _____ est
the mistress   on   the couch   is

4

_____ _____ _____ bibit
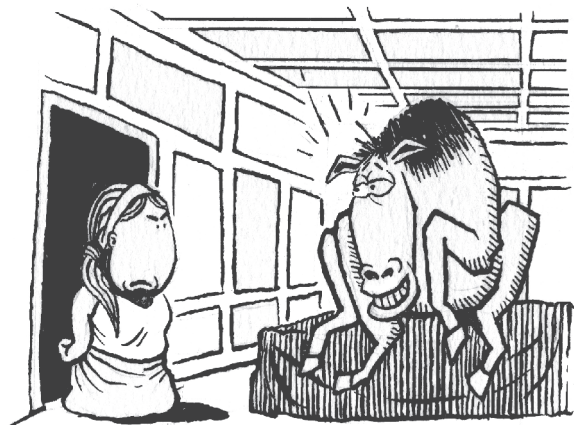the farmer   a jar   of wine   drinks

5

_____ _____ in _____ mittit
the farmer   the slave   into   the amphitheatre   sends

6

_____ in _____ _____ sedet
the horse   in   the villa   of the woman   is sitting

7   _____ _____ ēbrius   in culīnā   sedet
     the slave   with wine   drunk   in the kitchen   sits