Latin for the Non-Latinist   by S.B.P. Haag

Not everyone who reads the <u>Labyrinth</u> reads Latin, or even understands individual Latin words. What sort of "quick and dirty" approach to the language can help you to become more Latin-literate? Are there any useful short cuts? Let's consider what sort of skills you would actually like to acquire.

First, there's pronunciation. It's probably best to learn the currently accepted classical way of pronouncing the letters, and only Anglicise common phrases when your companion in conversation does it first! Here goes: classical pronunciation says consonants are all like English ones <u>except</u>:

c is always like k
g is always as in "go"
h is always pronounced, as in "hat" (not as in "honour")
j (if it occurs) is always like y, as in "yet"
qu is always like kw
s is always as in "set"
v is always like w

Vowels are a bit harder:

a is always more or less like "pa"
e is always more or less like "eh" (and so should be super-easy for Canadians, eh?)

i is always more or less like "in" or "machine", <u>except</u> that in front of another vowel it is often like a j, that is, pronounced like y
o is always more or less like "post"
u is always more or less like "put", or like the double o in "tootle"

Diphthongs are the hardest to remember:

ae is like "pie"   au is like "now"
oe is like "toy"

(and any others are pronounced more or less as the two separate vowels would be: ui as in "do it", for example). Lastly, Latin words always have as many syllables as they have diphthongs or vowels, so don't get caught on a word like <u>voce</u> -- it's <u>two</u> syllables, pronounced "wokay". Here's some practice (answers at the end):

acies   aurum
vincunt   puellae
aeger   foedus
iam (or, with a j, jam)   vates
dominus   quae

Secondly, there's accent -- where do you put the stress on the words? The usual rule of thumb is to put it on the second last syllable, as most Italians still do. Sometimes that syllable has a "short" vowel, which moves the stress back one more syllable, like this:

          ácies   (because the i syllable is "short")
Compare   puéllae   (because the e syllable is "long")

Your best bet is to accent the second last syllable, unless the last syllable is another vowel, as in pátria, for example. You'll make some mistakes, but you'll get most words right.

Thirdly, a big one: meanings! Mostly, if the Latin word reminds you at once of an English one whose meaning you know, at least you will be in the right ball park. Consider:

servus: something to do with "serving", or "servants"? Well, it's actually a slave, but fairly close.

patria: something like "patriot"? Sort of, but closer to "repatriate", or send back to one's own country, one's "patria".

agricola: something like "agriculture"? Sure, only in Latin it's a farmer.

domus: "domestic"? Actually, a house.

divido: "divide"? Right on! Means "I divide".

1

Fourthly, the biggest one of all: Why don't Latin words stay the same, the way English ones do? Of course, English ones <u>don't</u>, as a matter of fact. Consider a "farmer", or "farmers"; a "house" or "houses"; a "mouse" - or "mice"; not to mention "he" or "him" or "she" or "her". The problem is that Latin words change almost endlessly, as far as the novice is concerned. Notice two things here: one, the changes always tell what jobs the words are doing in the sentence, so word order doesn't so much matter; two, unless you learn Latin properly, you won't be able to do much with sentences, even short ones, though a few simple rules may help:

1. <u>nouns</u> or names of things, not in sentences, have singulars and plurals like this (usually!):

    singular ends in -a, then plural ends in -ae
    singular ends in -us (and lots in -er), then plural ends in -i
    singular ends in -um, then plurals end in -a

    If the singular ends in anything else, the plural is likely to end in -es, but all kinds of pitfalls occur, and often your only hope is to think of a related English word (a derivative) and see how it works:

    dens, plural dentes (English "dentist")
    rex, plural reges (English "regal")
    consul, plural consules

    Quite a lot of words besides those ending in -um are also neuter and so have a plural in -a, even some like tempus, plural tempora. Practice making plurals for these (answers at end):

annus	templum
ager	lex
filia	dies
sol	animal
pater	equus

2. <u>Verbs</u>. These don't have separate pronouns (as in I see, you go, he left, etc.). Instead, the last letter(s) in the verb tell you who is doing the action. For example:

    o or m means "I ..."
    s means "you ..."
    t means "he" or "she" or "it"
    mus means "we"
    tis means "you" (plural)
    nt means "they"

    If the person is getting it done <u>to</u> him or her (what we call "passive" verbs in English), look for these letters:

r means "am ...-ed"
ris means "you are ...-ed"
tur means "he, she, it is ...-ed"
mur means "we" etc.
mini means "you"
ntur means "they"

Tenses (roughly meaning past or future as opposed to present) are also signalled by the spelling at the end of the verb. <u>Some</u> verbs use these patterns (but not all!):

-ba- means past continuous: "was ...ing"
-av- or -iv- means past definite: "-ed"
-bi- means future

So amabat means "he/she/it was loving".

3. <u>Adjectives</u>, unlike English but like French, for example, change their forms to "agree" with the nouns they go with: bonus agricola, bonae puellae ("good farmer", "good girls").

Last piece of advice: buy yourself a small, even pocket-sized dictionary, Latin-English. Now try pronouncing, making plurals, guessing (looking up!) meanings, translating very simple sentences. Try these (answers at end):

navis	mater	filius	aqua	victor

Sentences:

- mater me amat, et amo matrem (et = and)
- patres aquam et panem dant (panis = bread; "do" in Latin is <u>not</u> "do" in English - think of "donate" instead)
- filius Marcum amavit
- naves in aquam movebant
- boni filii patres amabunt

Notice that generally subject nouns come first, then object nouns (these almost always end in "m" or "s", or "a" if neuter plural), then verbs at the end of the sentence.

<u>Answers:</u>

áckee-ays, wińkunt (like "put", <u>not</u> "under"), eýe-ger (hard g), yahm, dóminus, ów-rum, pooélleye, fóydus, wáhtays, kwy (kw-eye).

annus, anni	templum, templa
ager, agri	lex, leges
filia, filiae	dies, dies
sol, soles	animal, animalia
pater, patres	equus, equi

navis, naves	ship
mater, matres	mother
filius, filii	son
aqua, aquae	water
victor, victores	victor

(My) mother loves me and I love (my) mother.
The fathers give water and bread.
(His) son loved Marcus.
The ships were moving in/on the water.
Good sons will love (their) fathers.