

50 Common Latin Phrases Every College Student Should Know

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While there may not be cities and countries full of people speaking Latin these days, that doesn't mean the ancient language is something you can just forget about. Not only are many of our words in English (not to mention many other languages) derived from Latin, but many of its words are still used in today's daily speaking and writing. So while you may not need to learn to speak or read the Latin language fluently, it can still be a big help in your quest for [higher education](#) to know a few words and phrases. Here are some of the most commonly used Latin expressions that you should learn to start improving your personal lexicon.

Must-Learn Terms

If you don't know these Latin terms, get to learning them ASAP, as they are commonly used in speaking and writing and may be hard to avoid.

1. **[Per se](#)**: The direct translation of this term is "by itself" and it means just that when used in English as well. You could use it to say that you don't find chemistry boring per se (by itself, intrinsically), but this professor's voice puts you to sleep.
2. **[Vice versa](#)**: From the Latin meaning "to change" or "turn around," this term means to reverse the order of something. This quote from Samuel Butler provides an example, "In the midst of vice we are in virtue, and vice versa."
3. **[Alma mater](#)**: If you don't know this term already, you'll become quite familiar with it once you graduate from college. The literal translation is "dear/bountiful mother" but you'll find it used in everyday language to denote the college or university from which one has graduated.
4. **[Magnum opus](#)**: Whether it's in writing, painting, sculpture or music, this Latin term denotes the greatest work done by an artist-- a true masterpiece.
5. **[Bona fide](#)**: While its literal translation means "good faith" this term has a few different shades of meaning in modern language. In legal terms, it is used to represent something that is presented without deception or fraud, or literally in good faith, honest, sincere and lawful. It is more commonly used to mean something that's the real deal or truly authentic.
6. **[Quasi](#)**: In Latin, this word means as if or as though and in English it is used as both an adjective in its own right and as a part of a compound word. It simply designates something that resembles something else but doesn't quite have all the same features.
7. **[Alter ego](#)**: Cicero coined this term, most likely taken from the Greek, to mean "a second self" or "another I" and its modern meaning hasn't changed much today. Many people have an alter ego, or another, perhaps hidden aspect of themselves. One example from popular culture is Beyonce's alter ego, Sasha Fierce.

8. **Verbatim:** If you repeat something verbatim you repeat it in exactly the same words, word for word with no changes and no improvisation.
9. **Status quo:** From the Latin meaning "the state in which" this term is used today to designate the existing state or condition of things. For example, if you're making money off of a high pollution industry it is to your interests to maintain the status quo when it comes to environmental law.

Writing

Knowing just what these terms and words mean can be a big help in improving your reading comprehension.

10. **Sic:** Found in writing, this Latin word most commonly finds a home in brackets (like this: [sic]) when quoting a statement or writing. It indicates that there is a spelling or grammar error (or just something out of the ordinary) in the original quotation and that the publication has only reproduced it faithfully, not made an error of their own.
11. **Id est:** You've likely seen this term in writing before, even if you weren't aware as it is commonly abbreviated to i.e. In Latin, it means "that is" and is used in English when the speaker or writer wants to give an example or explanation that specifies a statement.
12. **Deus ex machina:** In direct translation, this term means, "God out of a machine" and it harkens back ancient Greek and Roman plays. When the plot would become too tangled or confusing, the writers would simply bring in God, lowered in via a pulley system (the machine) and he would wrap it all up. Today, it's still used in literature to describe a plot where an artificial or improbable means of resolving a conflict is used.
13. **Exempli gratia:** You'll often see this term abbreviated to e.g. in writing. It means "for the sake of example" and when it see it in a sentence you can expect that is will be followed by some examples.
14. **Et cetera:** Few out there aren't familiar with this term but may not know it as well when it's spelled out like this and not abbreviated as etc. Meaning "and the others" it is used to denote that a list of things could continue ad infinitum (see below for definition) and that for the sake of brevity it's better to just wrap things up with a simple etc.
15. **Ex libris:** Back in the days when books were rarer and more expensive commodities than they were today, it was common to mark your books with a label bearing your own name and this phrase which means "from the library of." While not as common today, some true bibliophiles still use the labels.
16. **Ibidem:** Another abbreviated term, this word is more commonly seen in research writing in the form of "ibid." From the Latin for "in the same place" it is found in footnotes and bibliographies to designate that the same source has been cited twice in succession.
17. **Et alii:** You're unlikely to encounter this Latin phrase in its unabbreviated form, and will most likely only ever see it as et al when included. This is also a term that is found in footnotes and bibliographies which allows writers to refer to a large

number of authors without having to write each name out (for example, you could say that your source is Dr. Henry Jones et al.)

Everyday Talk

You've likely heard these words and phrases on the news or in conversations, and if you didn't know what they meant then, these definitions will help make it clear now.

18. **Ad infinitum**: You might be able to guess what this phrase means simply through its similarity to the word we use in English. It means "to infinity" and can be used to describe something that goes on, seemingly or actually endlessly, as some students might feel about certain classes.
19. **De facto**: In Latin, de facto means "from the fact" and in use in English it is often used to distinguish what is supposed to be the case from what is actually the reality. For example, legally, employers are not allowed to discriminate in hiring because of age, but many still practice de facto (in reality, in fact) discrimination.
20. **In toto**: No, this phrase doesn't mean that the cute little dog from *The Wizard of Oz* ate something, it means in all or entirely. Think of it as saying "in total" in a really weird voice.
21. **Ipsa facto**: Meaning "by the fact itself" this commonly used and misused term denotes when something is true by its very nature. For example, if you don't feed your dog you are ipso facto a bad owner.
22. **Tabula rasa**: When you were a child, your mind might have been more of a tabula rasa than it is today. This Latin phrase means "clean slate" and denotes something or someone not affected by experiences and impressions.
23. **Terra firma**: Those who hate to fly or get seriously seasick will be able to put this term to good use. It means firm ground, and you might be thanking your lucky stars to be back on it after a trip through the air or rough waters.
24. **Mea culpa**: If you want to admit your own guilt or wrongdoing in a situation, use this Latin phrase that translates literally to "my fault." It's a bit like a fancier, less outdated way of saying "my bad."
25. **Persona non grata**: From the Latin meaning an "unacceptable person" this term designates someone who's no longer welcome in a social or business situation.
26. **In situ**: If something happens in situ it happens in place or on site, though the term often designates something that exists in an original or natural state. Like a rare species sighted in situ or an invaluable artifact found on an archeological site.
27. **In vitro**: Most students will be familiar with this term because of modern fertility treatments, but have you ever considered what the term actually means? In Latin, in vitro means "in glass" and any biological process that occurs in the laboratory rather than in the body or a natural setting can be called in vitro.
28. **In vivo**: While an experiment taking place in a glass test tube might not cause a stir, many are up in arms about this kind of experimentation. In vivo means "within the living" and the two most common examples of this kind of experimentation are animal testing and clinical trials.
29. **Ante bellum**: During your history courses, you're bound to encounter this term. It means in the most basic sense "before the war" and while it can be applied to any

war it is most commonly used to refer to the American Civil War and the Antebellum Era the preceded it.

Arguments and Logic

Representing arguments as old as philosophy itself and the terms associated with them, these terms are good to know for a well-rounded education.

30. **A priori:** You might come across this term in classes about logic or reasoning. It means taking a general law or idea and applying it to a particular instance without needing experimentation or observation. An example of an a priori statement that is used is, "all bachelors are single." You do not need to observe this to see that it is true because, by definition, bachelors must be single.
31. **A posteriori:** A posteriori arguments are different than a priori because they are based on actual observation or experimentation. Continuing on the previous example, an a posteriori example of reasoning might be that "some bachelors are happy." This can be based on real life observation isn't a given based on what a bachelor is.
32. **Ad nauseam:** This Latin term is used to describe an argument that has been taking place to the point of nausea, often with the same arguments being rehashed over and over for years until everyone, except a select few, are simply sick to death of the whole thing.
33. **Ergo:** Simply put, ergo means therefore and you can exchange it with therefore or hence in any sentence and maintain the same meaning. For example, you could say, "I think, ergo I am" without changing the meaning of the original.

Legal Language

One place where Latin words are very commonly used is in the courtroom. Learn some of these basic legal words to help you better understand *Law and Order* and how the legal process works.

34. **Compis mentis:** Meaning "in command of one's mind" this term is used in the legal field to denote someone who is competent to stand trial and not encumbered by mental illness or handicap.
35. **Subpoena:** If you've ever watched a legal drama on TV, you've more than likely heard this term thrown around but perhaps haven't given much thought as to what it really means. The word subpoena comes from the Latin meaning "under penalty" and if someone delivers a subpoena to you have to respond or they'll be some big penalties under the law.
36. **Ad hominem:** In court, or outside of it for that matter, this term is used to designate an argument that attacks someone's character rather than addressing a question or issue at hand. By attacking character, these arguments appeal to emotions and prejudices rather than reason or logic.
37. **Habeas corpus:** A writ of habeas corpus (literally, have the body) requires a person to appear before the court in person, generally to ascertain whether or not the

detention of that person is lawful. Habeas corpus cannot be suspended unless there is reason to believe that a person could pose a danger to the public.

38. **Pro bono:** Pro bono means "for the good" and it's a term used to designate when something is done free of charge. While the term can be applied in any field, it is most commonly used to describe legal services.
39. **Mens rea:** There is a big difference between murder and manslaughter, and mens rea is what separates the two. Mens rea means "guilty mind," and those who go into a crime intending to commit it have it, differing from those who commit a crime accidentally or without advance planning.

Business

It's always good to know the language of business, especially in such a competitive market. No matter what field you enter, you're bound to hear these words at some point in your career.

40. **Ad hoc:** From the Latin meaning "to this," this term gained popularity in the mid-1600s and it still used today. It refers to something that is formed or done quickly to meet the needs of a particular problem or issue without regard to a more general application and generally lacking advance planning.
41. **Per diem:** Meaning "by the day" a per diem in most uses today designates a daily allowance used in traveling for work. It can also mean a per-day rate or that someone is paid on a daily basis. Other common similar terms are per annum (by the year) and per capita (by the person.)
42. **Curriculum vitae:** A curriculum vitae is basically a fancy way to describe a resume. While it means literally "the course of one's life" the terms is applied to mean a short list of your accomplishments and training-- something any grad will need to think about putting together soon.
43. **Pro rata:** This Latin phrase is something you're likely familiar with in everyday life. It means to charge at a proportional rate. So if a service is \$100 for 10 hours, then one would cost \$10 pro rata.
44. **Quid pro quo:** While Anthony Hopkins so sinisterly used this phrase in *The Silence of the Lambs*, in everyday life it's often used to describe an exchange of value necessary for a contract to take place. From the Latin meaning "this for that," it gets used in everywhere from the courtroom to the bedroom in modern English.

Quotes and Sayings

These quotes and sayings in Latin get tossed around, put on bumper stickers and repeated in conversations so they're well-worth knowing.

45. **Carpe diem:** This well-known phrase comes from a poem by Horace. While there have been arguments about the exact translation, it is most commonly held to mean "seize the day" encouraging individuals to live life to the fullest today without expectation of a tomorrow.
46. **Cogito ergo sum:** Translated from the Latin, the quote means "I think, therefore I am" and comes from the writing of philosopher Rene Descartes.

47. **Veni, vidi, vici**: These famous words were purported uttered by Roman emperor Julius Caesar after a short war with Pharnaces II of Pontus. Translated, it means "I came, I saw, I conquered" an adage you can hopefully keep in mind come finals time.
48. **In vino veritas**: If you're old enough to drink or have been around others who have imbibed, you're more than likely already familiar with the wisdom behind this quote from Pliny the Elder meaning, "in wine there is the truth." It is often followed up with "in aqua sanitas" or "in water there is health"-- something all college students should remember.
49. **E pluribus unum**: Simply take a look at American currency to see this Latin phrase in use. It means "out of many, one" and is found on anything bearing the seal of the United States.
50. **Et tu, Brute?**: These are the famous last words of Julius Caesar after he is murdered by his friend Marcus Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. They mean "Even you, Brutus?" and are used poetically today to designate any form of the utmost betrayal.