

The Latin Advantage Redux

Why study Latin? Whether to engage with the writings of the ancient Romans without an intermediary, to revel in the magic of words (both Latin and a *plethora* of English derivatives), or to become part of a close-knit community with common goals (after all, “[friendship starts in Latin class](#)”), the study of Latin can contribute to great personal growth and a better understanding of both oneself and the world.

But what about the more “tangible” (from Latin *tangere*, “to touch”) benefits that learning Latin can offer? For elementary students to those in college and beyond, studying Latin has been shown to bolster vocabulary skills, improve reading comprehension, and develop critical thinking.

Elementary and Middle School

Due to several quirks of history, a large percentage of English vocabulary—by some estimates, about 50%—is derived from Latin. An even greater percentage of technical and scientific vocabulary comes from Latin. It thus stands to reason that studying Latin positively affects English vocabulary acquisition and is also associated with gains in reading comprehension.

Studies from the 1970s through the modern day indicate many ways in which studying Latin can benefit younger students’ English language skills and more:

- [The Language Transfer Program](#), begun in Los Angeles in 1974, incorporated Latin into the elementary curriculum in order to help Spanish-speaking students improve their English language skills. An evaluation of this program indicated that fifth grade students who studied Latin for three months experienced a mean score gain of four months in vocabulary, four months in reading comprehension, and three months in total reading on the California Test of Basic Skills. Students in the control group did not make any gains in the same time frame.
- Philadelphia initiated the program [Language Arts through Latin](#) in 1979 for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students of all abilities. Those students who studied Latin scored seven points higher in reading comprehension and nine points higher in language mechanics on the California Test of Basic Skills, as compared to a control group—both statistically significant differences.
- [In rural North Carolina](#) in the 1980s, sixth and seventh graders who studied Latin twice per week for thirty minutes made significant gains on the vocabulary portion of the Stanford Achievement Test, as compared with a matched control group.
- In a 1984 evaluation of the [Latin Cornerstone Project of New York City](#), fifth and sixth grade students who had studied Latin for ninety minutes per week for six months were matched with students who did not study Latin. The Latin students experienced significant gains over the non-Latin students in reading comprehension and vocabulary on the California Achievement Test.
- A [2016 study](#) conducted in a working class community in the northeastern United States indicated that middle school students improved their knowledge of academic vocabulary when they studied Latin word roots. Most notably, the students who had studied Latin

roots were better equipped to analyze and interpret unfamiliar words, using their newly developed morphological awareness to break words into their components. A [2018 study](#) revealed similar benefits for English language learners from diverse backgrounds.

High School

SAT Scores Studies conducted by the Educational Testing Service show that Latin students consistently outperform all other students on the verbal portion of the SAT. Below is a table showing mean verbal scores of students according to language studied in high school for the years 2015 and 2016.

	2015	2016
Latin	560	561
Chinese	546	543
French	522	522
German	532	532
Hebrew	527	524
Spanish	500	499
All Students	495	494

*Data made available by the College Board and excerpted from the [2015](#) and [2016](#) *College-Bound Seniors* reports. Beginning in 2017, the College Board no longer provided SAT/language studied correlations.

College and Beyond

Continuing to study classics (Latin, Greek, or both) in college further prepares students for a variety of careers. Studying classics develops critical thinking and close reading, while also requiring extensive analytical writing—all broad academic training essential for today’s knowledge economy.

For those students hoping to pursue further studies in graduate school, focusing on classics correlates with a GRE score boost. Data collected from the [late 1990s](#) and the [2010s](#) suggest that classics and classical languages majors score among the highest on the verbal portion of the GRE and perform strongly on the quantitative reasoning portion.

Students interested in entering any number of professions will also find that a background in classics can lead to success. According to a [2018 study by the Paideia Institute](#), classics majors have entered fields as diverse as media, technology, health science, marketing, education, law and government, and business.

Here, we’ll take a look at how learning Latin (and Greek) can help in pursuing several careers.

Law

One career for which classics provides an excellent background is law—and not just because Latin phrases pervade the legal profession (think *habeas corpus* and *res ipsa loquitur*). [According to Derek T. Muller](#), an associate professor of law at Pepperdine University School of Law, “the best prospective law students read Homer.” Analyzing 2013 LSAT data, Muller compiled a list of top median LSAT scores by major for 2013 law school applicants.

Undergraduate Major	Number of Applicants	LSAT Score	Undergraduate GPA
Classics	190	159.8	3.477
Policy Studies	209	158.8	3.435
International Relations	850	157.3	3.382
Art History	155	157.1	3.453
Mathematics	203	157.0	3.332
Philosophy	1773	156.8	3.308
International Studies	507	156.6	3.421
Government/Service	408	156.3	3.352
Economics	2185	156.2	3.307
Biology, Specialization	328	155.8	3.217

*Data excerpted from Muller’s blog, [Excess of Democracy](#).

The trends noted by Muller continue to hold true. The Law School Admission Council has released [mean LSAT scores by undergraduate major for 2017](#). Of academic majors with at least 150 students taking the LSAT, math majors earned the highest mean scores (162.80), followed by classics majors (160.38), then economics majors (158.99) and policy studies majors (158.99).

Medicine

The intellectual rigor often cultivated in the classics also prepares students well for careers in medicine. [In a compilation of statistics for 1997 medical school applicants](#), classics students exhibited the highest average score on the verbal reasoning portion of the MCAT, as compared to students in other majors. These data also indicate a healthy acceptance rate for classics students into medical schools—higher than all other majors listed. More generally, humanities majors continue to perform well on the MCAT: alongside math and statistics and physical science majors, humanities majors tend to have [the highest mean MCAT scores and the highest medical school admission rates](#) according to [2018–19 statistics released by the American Association of Medical Colleges](#).

Of course, knowledge of Latin (and Greek) is also helpful for would-be medical professionals hoping to master medical terminology since “approximately 95% of English medical terms are borrowed from . . . [Latin or latinized Greek](#).” [A 2002 overview](#) of the use of Latin in the field of medicine concluded, “it is debatable whether . . . English medical terminology can at all be reasonably mastered without the knowledge of basic Latin.”

Business

Many business leaders have linked success in business to a solid education in Latin. Tim O’Reilly, founder of the O’Reilly media company, studied classics at Harvard University. [He has asserted](#), “The classics are part of my mental toolset, the context I think with.” Michael Ortner,

founder of software review firm Capterra, [also advocates for the study of Latin](#), touting its ability to help students develop logic, gain essential perspective, and acquire sound judgment. Ortner states:

What could Latin possibly have to do with doing well in the field of business? Can Latin help you become an entrepreneur and start a business, or a rock star employee who helps your company thrive and accomplish its mission? I am convinced of both.

Steve Forbes, the editor-in-chief of *Forbes* magazine and author of *Power Ambition Glory*, develops this idea further, emphasizing that modern business leaders can learn valuable lessons [from studying ancient models of success and achievement](#).

In an article for Kiplinger.com, Stacy Rapacon lists classics as [one of the best twenty-five college majors](#) for a lucrative career. Of particular importance are the transferable skills that students develop in pursuing Latin and Greek, such as critical thinking and research skills.

A background in classical languages and literature can offer flexibility in one's career, but perhaps its greatest benefit lies in loftier realms. Latin (and Greek) can provide important tools for examining life's deeper meanings. These languages can inspire and awe, challenge and surprise, and open up new vistas into cultures radically different—and yet sometimes shockingly similar—to our own.

The “Latin Advantage” is about so much more than test scores and graduate school admissions. Rather, it's one key to unlocking the past and discovering our shared humanity with people who lived two thousand years ago. It's also an entry point into the communities of Latin scholars, writers, speakers, and enthusiasts who used the language in countless ways, even after the decline of Latin as a vernacular.

Why study Latin? From the deeply practical to the abstract and philosophical, there might just be a reason that resonates with you.

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