

Top Five Latin Myths

By Amy Barr

Choosing a language to study at home can be stressful. No matter what you pick there will be a heavy time and money investment due. The study of Classical languages is alive and well among homeschool families, so no doubt you have considered Latin. Is it just a passing trend? Some wonder what's so great about a dead language when resources and patience are so limited. Others start Latin at home as soon as toddlers can hold a flash card. Latin, they assert, must be started as young as possible. Have you already missed the boat with your older children? Let's look at the top five myths about learning Latin, and then you can decide for yourself if Latin is a good choice for your crew at home.

Myth #1: A child must start Latin young to be a success.

If you want to keep college on your child's horizon, her transcript must include a minimum of two reasonably hearty years of the same foreign language at the high school level. Three years looks even better to the admissions dean. A challenging fourth year might win her college language credits by succeeding on the AP exam. Students can choose from Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and Latin. Aside from the pleasures of academic success, most of us want our children to adeptly use and enjoy a foreign language, but we fear time has flown by too quickly. There is so much pressure to start new languages extremely early. Can a person start Latin late, in high school, and still be a success? Absolutely yes.

Parental guilt about early language instruction (or lack thereof) is common and often crippling. Such guilt is generally unwarranted. If your child wasn't accurately conjugating his Latin verbs at age six, please don't despair. While there's normally no harm in starting Latin early, the ideal time to start is closer to grades 8-12. Give him some strong background in English language mechanics and then let your 13-18 year old invest his energies in Latin when his formal reasoning skills promote the best success.

Myth #2: Learning Latin is no different than studying a modern language.

Latin is mostly unspoken. While students must learn to properly pronounce and read Latin, most don't invest much time making casual conversation. When your child learns a modern language she'll spend hours on proper pronunciation and comprehension clues in short, simple sentences. Accent mimicry and active listening nurture mental muscles from even a young age, but the ability to analyze Latin's visual cues develops later. Older students have formal reasoning skills that younger children lack. Latin will unlock the secrets of language mechanics, but your child needs some mental maturity to make that happen. This rule actually applies to all languages. Even if your child began Spanish at age six, in most cases she won't be ready for advanced grammar and sophisticated literature until her teen years. Unlike French, Spanish, or German, there is no real advantage to starting Latin early just to master proper accent.

Myth #3: Any Latin will do.

It is easy to feel intimidated by Latin if you have never studied it for yourself. It makes sense that some programs are specially designed for the unskilled home educator to teach without any background in Latin. As there is for modern languages, there are self-taught computer based programs. These are very tempting for teens in very busy homes. Light and

fun approaches can certainly launch the Latin ship, but how far will it sail? Visualize your language objectives as early as possible. If your goal is limited to writing two years of Latin on a high school transcript, your child must still invest appropriate time and effort for those credits. Be sure to select as challenging an approach as possible so she can learn to read real Latin while bolstering vocabulary, English, writing, reading, and logic. Push her to pursue mastery instead of simple familiarity. This investment of time and effort will pay huge dividends.

Another consideration is the type of Latin being taught to your student. Latin was a living language for over 2,000 years. It went through many changes over time. Consider English. Even modest calculations suggest we use only 1/6th of Shakespeare's vocabulary. All languages simplify. Vocabulary shrinks, and grammar gets easier. Many elementary instructor-friendly approaches rely on "Late Latin" for this reason: it is very easy. Don't be surprised if several years of elementary Latin count for very little, and your student must start over from the beginning for high school credit. Latin programs are seldom one size fits all. Elementary Latin offers the bare basics and a little vocabulary. This always serves to make a student familiar rather than fluent.

Myth #4: Latin is best reserved for above average students.

Is Latin more academically challenging than other languages? Latin, like biology, algebra, and history, always has its challenges. All these subjects require determination and effort. It has been observed far and wide that students who take high school Latin tend to go on to pursue more academically challenging fields in college. Students who take Latin in college tend to move to the top of their chosen field after graduation. Latin, like math and music, trains the brain to be more analytical, observant, and logical. Latin is not, however, best reserved for above average students. On the contrary, Latin can help make a student rise above average.

Myth #5: Latin is not practical.

The same scene repeats itself often. I ask the girl if she is interested in learning Latin. The 14 year old shrugs and says Spanish is more practical. She doesn't seem convinced. "Oh? What do you plan to study?" I notice she is fairly interested in the Latin text as she recognizes many of the words look like Spanish. She admits she doesn't know what she plans to do or study. All she knows is that she'll encounter Spanish speakers more often than people who speak Latin. Is Latin impractical?

Colleges require students to study a second language for a variety of very good reasons. Americans have a horrible track record of failing to master other languages. This failure to be more global is far from being a primary consideration. Learning another language does a number of important things to us and for us. The side effects of learning a language are just as important as the language itself.

Language study requires discipline. Even a brilliant student will struggle a bit to rewire the language centers in his brain. Regular practice is the only way to succeed and so language learning requires determination. Most of us already succeeded at mastering a first language in our infancy, but we had to struggle with it daily. Picking up a second language is comparatively easy though we've gotten out of practice. Mastering a language also requires analytical alertness. One has to observe, understand, and employ the rules again and again until they become effortless habit. Discipline, determination, and analysis are all ideal characteristics for a successful person in any field or endeavor.

There's intrinsic value in learning any language, but is Latin as practical if not more so than most? Think of Latin as the source code, the foundation, or the blueprint for all languages. It directly contributes to the grammar and vocabulary of many languages (such as Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, and a sizable portion of English) therefore, it is one of the best language models available. It offers everything we need to decode language of every kind from Indo-European German and Russian to Chinese and Japanese. If one is only going to learn one other language in a lifetime, Latin is an excellent choice. If one plans to master many more, Latin will make it considerably easier.

Latin is foundational to mastering any other language including English. It also goes without saying that Latin is essential in the science, medicine, and legal professions. Finally, a serious study of Latin helps build the skills necessary to tackle anything with determination, discipline, and logic. Latin is the most practical subject your child can master.

Amy Barr is a homeschool mother of three and a full-time instructor of other home-educated students as co-founder of The Lukeion Project, www.lukeion.org. As an archaeologist, she spent more than a decade excavating sites throughout the Mediterranean and teaching Classics at the college level. Now she and her husband, Regan Barr, offer their expertise through live online workshops and college preparatory high school courses about the Classical world, Latin, and Greek. The two of them lead annual family tours to the Mediterranean and invite you to join them for a tour.

Copyright, 2015. Used with permission. All rights reserved by author. Originally appeared in *The Old Schoolhouse® Magazine*, the family education magazine, Fall 2015. Read the magazine free at www.TOSMagazine.com or read it on the go and download the free apps at www.TOSApps.com to read the magazine on your mobile devices.