Latin grammar Cāsūs

The big idea: Latin shows a word's job with its ending, not with its place in the sentence. English still does this a little: he sees him, his book. Latin does it with every noun. The six jobs are called cases.

Case	Its job	In English	Example
nominative nom	who or what does it: the subject	the rose, the master	Rosa pulchra est. The rose is beautiful.
genitive gen	of, whose	of the rose, the master's	nōmen rosae the name of the rose
dative dat	to, for: the one who gets something	to the master	Rosam dominō dō. I give the rose to the master.
accusative acc	who or what it's done to; after ad, to, and per, through	the rose (seen, given)	Rosam videō. I see the rose.
ablative abl	by, with, from, in; after cum, sine, ā, ē, dē and in, in	with the master, by hand	cum dominō with the master
vocative voc	calling to someone	O master!	Domine! Master! Sir!

Remember the order: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, vocative: Never Give Dad Any Awful Vegetables. Some books put the vocative and the accusative second and third; the endings are the same.

Each pattern of endings is a declension. The first two:

rosa, rosae rose

1st · feminine

	one	more
nom	rosa	rosae
gen	rosae	rosārum
dat	rosae	rosīs
acc	rosam	rosās
abl	rosā	rosīs
voc	rosa	rosae

dominus, dominī master, lord

2nd · masculine

	one	more
nom	dominus	dominī
gen	dominī	dominōrum
dat	dominō	dominīs
acc	dominum	dominōs
abl	dominō	dominīs
voc	domine	dominī

verbum, verbī word

2nd · neuter

	one	more
nom	verbum	verba
gen	verbī	verbōrum
dat	verbō	verbīs
acc	verbum	verba
abl	verbō	verbīs
voc	verbum	verba

Read the coloured part: the stem stays, the ending moves: ros-, domin-, verb-. Blue is masculine, pink feminine, green neuter.

The line matters: rosa, the rose, is doing it; rosā, with the rose, is the ablative. Only the macron tells them apart.

One form, several jobs: rosae can mean of the rose, to the rose or roses. The rest of the sentence decides.

Neuter words look the same doing it and having it done to them, and their plural ends in -a: verbum, verba.

Three more declensions Dēclīnātiōnēs

Which pattern? the dictionary gives two forms of every noun: the nominative and the genitive. The genitive ending tells you the declension.

Declension	Genitive ends	Dictionary entries
1st	-ae	rosa, rosae · puella, puellae
2nd	-ī	dominus, dominī · verbum, verbī
3rd	-is	rēx, rēgis · corpus, corporis
4th	-ūs	manus, manūs · domus, domūs
5th	-eī or -ēī	rēs, reī · diēs, diēī

The third declension is the biggest family; the fourth and fifth are small

rēx, rēgis
king
3rd · masculine

	one	more
nom	rēx	rēgēs
gen	rēgis	rēgum
dat	rēgī	rēgibus
acc	rēgem	rēgēs
abl	rēge	rēgibus
voc	rēx	rēgēs

corpus, corporis
body
3rd · neuter

	one	more
nom	corpus	corpora
gen	corporis	corporum
dat	corporī	corporibus
acc	corpus	corpora
abl	corpore	corporibus
voc	corpus	corpora

manus, manūs
hand
4th · feminine

	one	more
nom	manus	manūs
gen	manūs	manuum
dat	manuī	manibus
acc	manum	manūs
abl	manū	manibus
voc	manus	manūs

rēs, reī
thing, matter
5th · feminine

	one	more
nom	rēs	rēs
gen	reī	rērum
dat	reī	rēbus
acc	rem	rēs
abl	rē	rēbus
voc	rēs	rēs

The stem hides in the genitive: rēx, rēg-is; corpus, corpor-is; nōmen, nōmin-is, name; tempus, tempor-is, time. English words come from the stem: regal, corporal, nominal, temporary.

Third declension neuters follow the neuter rule too: corpus has corpus for both jobs, and corpora in the plural. Watch the ending -us: corpus is not like dominus.

manus is feminine although it ends in -us. Its genitive manūs differs from manus only by the line. Manual and manuscript come from it: manū scrīptum, written by hand.

rēs means thing, matter, affair. The re: at the top of an email is Latin too: in rē, in the matter of. Diēs, day, follows rēs.

Cases you already know

carpe diem
seize the day
diem: accusative of diēs, day (5th)

per diem
for each day
diem again, after per

in memoriam
in memory
accusative after in

alma māter
nourishing mother
nominative, 1st

magnum opus
great work
neuter nominative

in vitrō
in glass
ablative of vitrum, glass

Verbs in the present Tempus praesēns

The ending says who: every verb ends the same six ways: **-ō** (or -m), **-s**, **-t**, **-mus**, **-tis**, **-nt**. Chant them like a rhyme: ō, s, t, mus, tis, nt. So amō already means I love; ego, I, is only for weight.

	sum, esse the odd one · be	amō, amāre 1st conjugation · love	videō, vidēre 2nd conjugation · see	legō, legere 3rd conjugation · read	audiō, audīre 4th conjugation · hear
I	sum	amō	videō	legō	audiō
you	es	amās	vidēs	legis	audīs
he, she, it	est	amat	videt	legit	audit
we	sumus	amāmus	vidēmus	legimus	audīmus
you all	estis	amātis	vidētis	legitis	audītis
they	sunt	amant	vident	legunt	audiunt

Which conjugation? look at the second dictionary form, the infinitive, to love, to see: **-āre** 1st, **-ēre** 2nd, **-ere** 3rd, **-īre** 4th. The 2nd and 3rd differ only by the line, and you hear it in the stress: vi-DĒ-re, but LE-ge-re.

A 3rd conjugation twist: some verbs keep an i, like capiō, take, and faciō, make: capiō capis capit capimus capitis capiunt.

Can: possum is pot- + sum, to be able: possum potes potest possumus potestis possunt. The infinitive is posse.

Saying no: nōn goes before the verb: nōn sum, I'm not; nōn videt, she doesn't see.

Asking: stick -ne on the first word: Vidēsne? Do you see? Estne? Is it? No do is needed.

Esse, to be, is the odd one, as in most languages, and the most useful. Rōma in Italiā est, Rome is in Italy. Latin sometimes leaves it out: Rōma pulchra, Rome is beautiful.

Say them out loud

Puella rosam amat.
The girl loves the rose.

Rēgem vidēmus.
We see the king.

Librum legō.
I'm reading a book.

Audīsne?
Can you hear? Do you hear?

Six more everyday verbs: the infinitive tells the conjugation

labōrō, labōrāre
1st · work
he, she: labōrat

habeō, habēre
2nd · have
he, she: habet

dīcō, dīcere
3rd · say
he, she: dīcit

scrībō, scrībere
3rd · write
he, she: scrībit

veniō, venīre
4th · come
he, she: venit

dormiō, dormīre
4th · sleep
he, she: dormit

Short before t and nt: amās and amāmus have a long ā, but amat and amant a short one. A vowel is always short before a final -t, -nt or -m.

Past, order, agreement Perfectum

The perfect is the everyday past: amāvī is I loved, and also I have loved. Its endings are new, but there are only six, and they work on every verb.

	amāvī I loved, I have loved	fuī I was, I have been
I	amāvī	fuī
you	amāvistī	fuistī
he, she, it	amāvit	fuit
we	amāvimus	fuimus
you all	amāvistis	fuistis
they	amāvērunt	fuērunt

The perfect stem comes from the dictionary: a full entry has four forms: amō, amāre, amāvī, amātum. The third is the perfect. The 1st and 4th conjugations usually add -v-: amāvī, audīvī. The others you learn with the word.

Vēnī, vīdī, vīcī: I came, I saw, I conquered, Caesar's famous message, is three perfects in a row: veniō, videō, vincō.

amāvī I loved amō, amāre	**audīvī** I heard audiō, audīre	**vīdī** I saw videō, vidēre	**lēgī** I read legō, legere	**vēnī** I came veniō, venīre
cēpī I took capiō, capere	**fēcī** I made, did faciō, facere	**dīxī** I said dīcō, dīcere	**habuī** I had habeō, habēre	**fuī** I was sum, esse

Word order is free: the endings carry the meaning

Puella rēgem videt. the girl sees the king	**Rēgem puella videt.** the girl sees the king: it's the king she sees	**Videt puella rēgem.** the girl sees the king: she really does see him	**Puellam rēx videt.** the king sees the girl: the endings swapped

How to read any sentence: find the verb, usually last, then the nominative, who does it, then the accusative, who it's done to. Moving a word to the front gives it weight, like stress in English.

Adjectives agree with their noun

	masculine	feminine	neuter
one, doing it	bonus dominus	bona rosa	bonum verbum
one, done to	bonum dominum	bonam rosam	bonum verbum
more, doing it	bonī dominī	bonae rosae	bona verba
with, by	bonō dominō	bonā rosā	bonō verbō

Agree, not rhyme: an adjective matches the noun's gender, number and case, not its ending. Nauta, sailor, is masculine, so a good sailor is nauta bonus. Rēx bonus, a good king; manus bona, a good hand.

Hear it in a motto: mēns sāna in corpore sānō, a healthy mind in a healthy body. Sāna goes with mēns, sānō with corpore. Some adjectives follow the 3rd declension: rēx fortis, corpus forte, strong.

Roman numerals Numerī Rōmānī

Seven letters do it all. Remember them in order with I Value Xylophones Like Cows Dig Milk.

I	V	X	L	C	D	M
1	5	10	50	100	500	1,000
one finger	an open hand	two hands, two Vs		think centum, a hundred		think mīlle, a thousand

1. Add, biggest first: XVI is 10 + 5 + 1 = 16; MDC is 1000 + 500 + 100 = 1600.

2. Smaller in front takes away: IV is 5 - 1 = 4; XC is 100 - 10 = 90.

3. No more than three in a row: III is 3, but 4 is IV, not IIII (clocks are the exception, below).

4. V, L and D never repeat and never take away: 10 is X, not VV; 95 is XCV, not VC.

Only six pairs take away

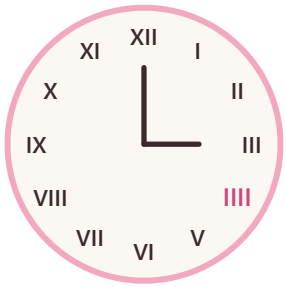
IV	IX	XL	XC	CD	CM
4 = 5 - 1	9 = 10 - 1	40 = 50 - 10	90 = 100 - 10	400 = 500 - 100	900 = 1000 - 100

Common mistakes

Number	Not	But	Why
99	~~IC~~	XCIX	XC 90 + IX 9
49	~~IL~~	XLIX	XL 40 + IX 9
45	~~VL~~	XLV	XL 40 + V 5
1999	~~MIM~~	MCMXCIX	M 1000 + CM 900 + XC 90 + IX 9

Reading a year: split it into thousands, hundreds, tens, ones

MDCLXVI	1666	M 1000 + DC 600 + LX 60 + VI 6 · every letter once, biggest to smallest
MCMLXXXIV	1984	M 1000 + CM 900 + LXXX 80 + IV 4
MCMXCIX	1999	M 1000 + CM 900 + XC 90 + IX 9
MM	2000	MM 2000
MMXXVI	2026	MM 2000 + XX 20 + VI 6 · this year
MMMCMXCIX	3999	MMM 3000 + CM 900 + XC 90 + IX 9 · the biggest with plain letters



IIII, not IV, at four

Clocks use IIII: many clock faces print four as IIII. Nobody knows for certain why. A common answer: it balances the heavy VIII opposite. Romans themselves often carved IIII too.

Where you see them: chapters and parts (Chapter XII, Part II), kings and queens (Henry VIII), the year at the end of film credits, and small letters, i, ii, iii, iv, on the first pages of a book.

No zero, and big numbers: Romans had no numeral for zero; they wrote nūlla, none. For thousands they drew a line over a numeral: V with a line over it is 5,000. Some languages still write centuries this way: siglo XXI in Spanish, XXIe siècle in French.

Practice Exercitātiō

6 · twenty lines · answers at the bottom

How: give the form, name the case, say the verb, match the adjective or read the numeral. Write or say each answer, then check the small print at the bottom.

1	form	rosa: genitive plural	2	form	dominus: accusative singular
3	form	rēx: genitive singular	4	form	corpus: nominative plural
5	form	rēs: ablative plural	6	which case?	Rosam dominō dō: dominō
7	which case?	manū scrīptum: manū	8	which case?	nōmen verbī: verbī
9	say it	videō: we	10	say it	audiō: they
11	say it	legō: you all	12	say it	sum: we
13	past	amō: I loved	14	past	sum: they were
15	who sees whom?	Rēgem puella videt.	16	match it	bonus + rosa
17	match it	sānus + corpus	18	read it	MMXXVI
19	write it	1999	20	read it	XLIX

Answers

1 rosārum
2 dominum
3 rēgis
4 corpora
5 rēbus
6 dative, to the master
7 ablative, by hand
8 genitive, of the word
9 vidēmus
10 audiunt
11 legitis
12 sumus
13 amāvī
14 fuērunt
15 the girl sees the king
16 bona rosa
17 corpus sānum
18 2026
19 MCMXCIX
20 49

Meet a word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in subtitles to see what it means.