

Latin revived: Source-based vocabulary lessons courtesy of Harry Potter

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Teachers can capitalize on the popularity the Harry Potter books to interest students in the roots of words.

Thanks to J.K. Rowling, the phenomenally successful author of the Harry Potter books, people around the world are gaining a new appreciation of Latin. One reason her books are so internationally successful (they have been translated into some 30 languages) is Rowling's clever use of Latin-based words to name her characters, as well as their charms and spells. Because of the ubiquitous influence of Latin on the romance languages (Italian, Spanish, and French) as well as on English, which has borrowed heavily from them, Latin roots are such a productive source of English words that Rowling does not need to provide a glossary, nor do most translators need to find replacements. For example, *Lumos!* (from the Latin root *lumen, luminis*) is the Harry Potter spell for *light*. Italian readers quickly understand its meaning because of their word *luminoso*, which means *bright*. French speakers use *lumineux* for what English speakers describe as *luminous* and *lumière* for *light* or *knowledge*.

In this article, we suggest that teachers start with words from the Harry Potter books and then extend students' knowledge through additional English words based on the same roots. We have worked hard to find words that are related to the root words that Rowling uses. Yet when we give

demonstration lessons to teachers, most of whom are understandably worried about their students' scores on high-stakes vocabulary tests, some are tempted to work only with the most complex or obscure words that we present. The result is no worse than most vocabulary lessons, which are based on alphabetical lists of low-frequency words, but such an approach cancels out the main benefits of using a source-based approach.

And if our goal is to improve reading comprehension, then it makes sense to work with the kinds of common words that students might actually meet in their reading.

During our lessons, we hear occasional comments about learning "only a couple of new words." But when we inquire further, we find that the words that are new to one person are not the same as those that are new to someone else. We also learn that prior to our lesson no one in the group would have been able to think of all the words we present or to draw connections among them. For example, even people who have taken Latin are surprised to learn that the word *patter* comes from the noise heard in a church when the congregants are reciting the *paternoster* (our father) prayer, and that when people sign a mortgage (*mors, mortis*) on their house, they have signed a "dead pledge" on their ownership.

Such connections are important because they demonstrate that when speakers are in need of a new word, they often use familiar

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morphemes rather than arbitrarily creating new sound combinations and assigning them to new concepts. Having repeated experiences with sets of related words gives learners insights on the efficiency of language and justifiably raises their confidence in figuring out the meanings of words they haven't met before. In relation to learning the particular words in a source-based lesson, the words that learners already know provide them with mental hooks on which to hang the new words. Retention of vocabulary words is increased when learners can group them with familiar words.

We have all been taught that students learn words best when they see them in context. Using a source-based approach is one way to provide a portable context—one that learners can carry with them. Using the context is a good way to help readers discard inappropriate meanings of a word, but usually students come to a sentence with some idea of the word's meaning. Of course, when students are reading and they meet words they do not know, teachers need to give immediate help by providing the most likely meaning intended by the author. But at the same time, we need to be sure that somewhere in our teaching students learn that the same basic sets of letters have many meanings. This is where a source-based approach is helpful.

One way to make time in your day for these kinds of lessons is to prepare regular minilessons on selected Latin roots. Introduce the root and then, either on an overhead or a PowerPoint, list five or six words and a matching number of sentences. After your introduction, ask students to copy the sentences, filling in the most appropriate word while you take the roll and do other beginning-of-class chores. When we do this, we are happy to let students visit quietly with their neighbors and pool their information because we want them to experience saying and hearing the words. And because we are teaching rather than testing students, when we devise fill-in-the-blank sentences we include both semantic and grammatical clues (e.g., a capital letter if a word goes at

the beginning of a sentence and multiple lines if a phrase is needed) so that students get practice writing correct rather than incorrect sentences. We also like to increase involvement and sharing by providing students with printed word strips and poster-making materials so that small groups can illustrate particular words and “teach” them to the rest of the class. In today's educational settings, however, we've sadly discovered that few teachers believe they can afford the time for such “extras.”

The following lesson based on *armus*, *armī* (literally Latin for *shoulder*) for *arm* could be divided into two days for a younger class, but we present it here as a single lesson. In our own classes, we would probably bring in an army jacket or recruitment poster for the centerpiece of a bulletin board displaying student-written sentences using words derived from *armus*.

Information for teacher introduction

In the Harry Potter books, *Expelliarmus!* is the charm used to disarm a person. For example, at the end of *The Half-Blood Prince* (Book 6; Rowling, 2005) Draco Malfoy bursts through the door at the top of the Astronomy Tower and shouts “Expelliarmus!” at Professor Dumbledore. To his horror, Harry sees Dumbledore's wand fly out and arc over the ramparts and fall to the ground below. Whereas the first part of the charm, *Expell*, is similar to *expel* (meaning to send someone away from school), the *armus* part alludes to weapons.

An arm is an important part of the body, and speakers have extended the word in three different ways. One kind of metaphor relates to shape or physical appearance, as with the arm of a chair, the armature in an electric motor, and the yard arm of a ship that sticks out and holds the yards of canvas used for sails. Another usage refers to things connected to arms, as with an arm band or an arm rest. The third meaning (the one used in *Expelliarmus!*) is a more complicated metaphor based on the use of arms for fighting.

Figure 1
Student worksheet: English words based on Latin *armus*

As you fill in the blanks, choose from *alarm*, *armada*, *armadillos*, *Armistice Day*, *armoires*, *coat of arms*.

1. _____, now called Veterans' Day in the United States, originally celebrated the end of World War I when everyone agreed to "stand up" their arms.
2. European families used a _____ to identify or symbolize their families.
3. The word _____ came into English through the French word *alarme* and the Italian call to arms, *all'arme*.
4. _____, which today are large chests used mostly to hide television sets, were originally designed to store arms such as guns and swords.
5. Spanish explorers called their armored ships an _____.
6. In the New World when explorers saw animals with shells scurrying across the desert, they named them _____, Spanish for "little armored ships."

Now write at least three original sentences that use a word based on the Latin root *armus*. You may reuse some of the words we have talked about or think of others. You are welcome to use your dictionaries for help.

Early weapons (sticks and clubs) and later ones (knives, swords, and even guns) all extend the reach and the power of the human arm. Hence the metaphorical use of *arm* arose in relation to fighting, which is the use we talk about in our lessons.

Student involvement

A challenge in teaching vocabulary is to get students to take "ownership" and to be intellectually involved. One way to do this is to ask students to contribute to the lesson by providing examples of words derived from the Latin root. With this lesson, we start out by giving examples like these:

- In nearly all countries, taxpayers support some kind of an *army*.
- *Armor* is heavy protection worn on the body or put on a vehicle.

Then we encourage students, sometimes with considerable help, to add other examples. We ask for sentences rather than words so as to more

closely approximate real communication and provide practice with context. Here are examples:

- The U.S. *Armed Forces* include the navy, army, air force, coast guard, and national guard.
- To *arm* a bomb is to get it ready to go off.
- When people are *up in arms*, they are ready to fight.
- In a hostage situation, police try first to *disarm* the hostage-taker.
- In Iraq, soldiers are crafting homemade *armor* for their vehicles.
- *Firearms* are weapons that can shoot or explode.

Student worksheet

Because *armus* has been used in major languages for over 2,000 years, it has both literal and metaphorical descendants that English speakers share with speakers of other languages. The sentences on the student worksheet shown in Figure 1 illustrate some of these international usages. We

Table 1
Talking about the Harry Potter spell *Densaugo!*

Sample sentences for *dent*
 (from Latin *dens, dentis*, for *tooth*)

1. An *indented* paragraph looks as if it has a little bite taken out of it.
2. So does a *dented* fender.
3. Mice, rats, beavers, squirrels, and moles are called *rodents*, which literally translates to “gnawing teeth.”
4. Chefs describe vegetables cooked just enough to need chewing as *al dente*.
5. Friction is involved when people clean their teeth with a *dentifrice*.
6. While *indentured* servants feel they have had a bite taken out of their lives, the word actually refers to the indented paragraphs in legal documents.
7. Some leaves have *dentate* or sawtooth edges.
8. False teeth are also called *dentures*.

Sample sentences for *augeo, augēre; auctus, auctūs* (meaning *increase*)

1. The first Roman Emperor added *Augustus* to his name of Gaius Julius Caesar to increase his own importance.
2. A good *auctioneer* can increase the prices that people will pay.
3. In churches and civic organizations, the *auxiliaries* are smaller groups that enrich or extend the services of the main group.
4. Many U.S. retirees are looking for ways to *augment* their Social Security income.
5. In grammar an *augmentative* is a word that has been made bigger by the addition of affixes.
6. *Auxiliary* or helping verbs include various forms of *be, have, and do*.

ask students to figure out which words or phrases fit best as they copy the sentences and fill in the blank spaces. When finished, we have them try writing at least three original sentences using worksheet terms or other words related to *armus*. Students are welcome to consult dictionaries and visit with one another, but they must write their own sentences.

Teacher wrap-up

To emphasize the importance of context, we ask students to read the sentences they complete on their worksheet rather than just giving the number and their chosen word. When students are reading their own sentences, we repeat them in our “best voice” and, if necessary, adjust them for

better composition. The point is to provide each student with several “good” experiences with the designated Latin root. We might talk about the difference between the description of the parents at a parent–teacher meeting being up in arms, which we would expect to be metaphorical, as compared to the more literal—but still metaphorical—description of someone being arrested for bringing a firearm to school.

For comparisons to *armadillo*, if you have Spanish speakers in class, you might see if they can tell the class about any other words—either Spanish or English—that make use of the suffix *-illo* as in *peccadillo* (“little sin”) and *piccolo* (“little flute”). As a comparison to *armistice*, you could mention the summer and winter solstices,

Table 2
Other Latin roots and English derivations

Latin roots	Harry Potter use	Harry Potter meaning	English derivations
<i>Appareo, apparēre</i> (to come in sight)	<i>Aparecium!</i>	Spell to make invisible ink visible	Apparent, apparently, apparition, apparitor, appear, appearance, disappear, disappearance
	<i>Dissapparate!</i>	Spell to make someone or something disappear	
<i>Canto, cantāre</i> (to sing)	<i>Prior</i>	Charm that reveals the most recent spell or spells performed by a wand	Cantata, cantor, chants, Encanto Park (an “enchanted” park), enchantment, incantations, to recant
	<i>Incantato!</i>		
<i>Crux, crucis</i> (cross)	<i>Cruciatus!</i>	Unforgivable curse	Crucial, crucible, crucifix, crucifixion, the crusades, the crux of the matter, to crucify someone, to double-cross someone
	<i>Horcrux</i>	Item in which wizards store part of their soul to reclaim later	
<i>Pes, pedis</i> (foot)	<i>Impedimenta!</i>	Spell or jinx to slow down or stop an attacker	Centipede, expedite, impede, peddler, pedometer, pedestal, pedestrian, pedicure, pedicurist
<i>Incendium, incendiū</i> (fire)	<i>Incendio!</i>	A fire-lighting spell	Incense, also to incense someone (i.e., to metaphorically get them “all fired up”)
<i>Malum, malī</i> (evil or harm)	<i>Malfoy</i>	Surname of characters Lucius, Narcissus, and Draco who fit its “bad faith” meaning	Malady, malaria, malcontent, malevolent, malice aforethought, malicious, malignant, malnourished, malodorous, malpractice
<i>Mare, maris</i> (sea)	<i>Mer-</i>	Prefix for anything related to the people who live underwater (e.g., something mer-mish or mersong)	Marina, marinara sauce, marinate, marine architect or biologist, mariner’s compass, mermaid
<i>Mens, mentis</i> (mind)	<i>Dementors</i>	Creatures who suck out human souls	Demented, dementia, Mensa (organization), mental, mentally retarded, mentality, <i>non compos mentis</i> (legal term for “not of sound mind”)
	<i>Legilemency</i>	Mind reading	
	<i>Oclumency</i>	Method of closing out mind reading	

(continued)

Table 2
Other Latin roots and English derivations (continued)

Latin roots	Harry Potter use	Harry Potter meaning	English derivations
<i>Mors, mortis</i> (death)	<i>Lord Voldemort</i> <i>Morsmordre!</i>	Name Voldemort in French literally means “fleeing from death” “The Dark Mark” is a sign of death	Amortization, immortal, martyr, morbid, morgue, mortal, mortality, mortally, mortgage, mortified, mortuary, postmortem, rigor mortis
<i>Omnis, an</i> adjective (all)	<i>Omnioculars</i>	Better than binoculars, they allow viewers to see all in slow motion and through replays	Omnibus (later shortened to bus), omnipotent, omnipresent, an omniscient narrator, omnivore, omnivorous
<i>Patronus, patronī</i> (patron)	<i>Expecto Patronum!</i> <i>Patronus</i>	Charm that brings a protector Harry’s patronus is in the form of a stag, the animagus form of his father	Patron, patronize, patronym, patronage
<i>Petra, petrae</i> (rock or stone)	<i>Petrificus</i> <i>Totalus!</i>	Charm to freeze or stop someone	Peter, Pierre, and Piero (as names), petrification, petrified, the Petrified Forest, petrous
<i>Porto, portāre</i> (to carry)	<i>Portkey</i>	Object that transports or carries wizards to prearranged places	Exports, imports, portable, portages, portfolio, transportation
<i>Porta, portae</i> (gate or entrance)		Portkeys also open doors for the user	Airport, deportation, passport, porch, a portal, Portland, Portsmouth, port-hole, seaport
<i>Sono, sonāre</i> (to make a sound)	<i>Sonorus!</i>	Charm to magnify one’s own voice	Sonata, sonatina, sonic boom, sonnet, sonorant, sonorous, sound health, sound (geographical landmass), sounding board, supersonic
<i>Veritās, veritātis</i> (truth)	<i>Veritaserum</i>	Truth serum	Verily (archaic), verity
<i>Verus, an</i> adjective (true)			Veracity, verification, verify, verisimilitude

when the sun seems “to stand” in the same place making night and day the same duration.

For another example, you could use the sample sentences in Table 1 to talk about the Harry Potter spell *Densaugeo!* that causes teeth to grow uncontrollably. When Draco Malfoy once aimed it at Harry, it bounced off and hit Hermione. For convenience, the words that are based on *dent* (from the Latin noun *dens, dentis*, for *tooth*) and on the verb *augeo, augēre* or noun *auctus, auctūs* (meaning increase) are included in italics. If you wish to use these sentences for worksheets, you should replace them with blank lines.

Table 2 shows several other Latin roots that Harry Potter readers will probably recognize. You

can use them to create lessons much like the ones we have illustrated. In an advanced class, you could photocopy the chart, cut it up by rows, and ask groups of two or three students to study the words in a good dictionary and prepare an illustrated lesson to present to the rest of the class. If you do this, be sure students understand that when they create sample sentences their goal is to help fellow students figure out correct answers rather than to trick them into giving the wrong ones.

REFERENCE

Rowling, J.K. (2005). *Harry Potter and the half-blood prince*. New York: Scholastic.