

Beginner Latin Novels, a General Overview

John P. Piazza¹
Berkeley High School

ABSTRACT

In recent years some Latin teachers have followed the lead of their modern language counterparts who have written and published simple novels, in order to provide beginning students with more reading opportunities despite having a small working vocabulary. The result has been a flood of new resources. Now, many teachers are wondering which novels to choose, and how to use them in their classrooms. This article describes what beginner novels are, and how they can be used in Latin classrooms, regardless of level or method. This is followed by a survey of the novels that are currently available.

KEYWORDS

extensive reading, comprehensible input, Latin novellas, chapter books, reading comprehension, embedded reading, multi-level classes, differentiated instruction, sheltered vocabulary, reading strategies, free voluntary reading, sustained silent reading

In their search for a wider variety of reading resources for their beginning students (those in the first two years of language study), teachers of foreign languages have in recent years written and published beginner novels, simple chapter books which strictly limit vocabulary to a small number of high-frequency words. These books have been very popular for teachers of many languages, regardless of the methods and textbooks they use. In just the past few years, there has been a flood of Latin novels which follow the same pedagogical principles as their modern language counterparts. Some of them are translations of already existing English stories or

¹ John Piazza teaches Latin at Berkeley High School, in Berkeley, CA. He has a Master's degree in Classics, and is co-translator of *The Essential Marcus Aurelius*, published by Tarcher Penguin. Since studying with Reginald Foster in 2002, Piazza has worked to make Latin more accessible to learners through communicative methods based on contemporary language acquisition theory and practices. In 2006, he co-founded and still moderates the Latin Best Practices online community with Bob Patrick and David Maust. He has attended and taught in numerous Latin immersion experiences, and was recently trained as a TPRS coach. He is currently working with other educators to create a database of resources. Through his website, johnpiazza.net, he supports Latin teachers to refine their art by sharing ideas, methods, and resources.

Spanish novels, but the majority are original, and deal directly or indirectly with classical themes. The emergence of these novels is the result of much collaboration, which in turn has given rise to more novels and a growing body of supplementary resources that teachers have at their disposal. Now that these resources are becoming widely available, the challenge for teachers of Latin is to determine where beginner novels might fit into their specific curriculum and goals. Toward this end, this article will discuss what beginner novels are and how they can be used by Latin teachers, followed by a survey of the novels that are currently available.

WHAT IS A BEGINNER NOVEL?

A beginner novel is a chapter book containing anywhere from 20 to 100 or more pages, which has been written specifically with students in their first two years of language study in mind (novice-mid through intermediate-low, using ACTFL standards). The vocabulary has been selected to represent high-frequency words, that is, words that learners are most likely to encounter in everyday conversation and more advanced reading.² Most of the novels in this category contain fewer than 250 unique words, (although this number varies, depending on whether alternate forms and cognates are counted separately). These novels may include illustrations to support comprehension of the story, but are not considered picture books or graphic novels *per se*. While vocabulary is always limited in these novels—a practice which ESL educators refer to as “[sheltering](#)”—grammatical complexity is generally not. Students and teachers can expect to encounter examples from a variety of noun and verb groups (including irregulars), as well as various tenses and subordinate constructions, throughout a beginner novel. Rather than *explained*, such constructions will simply be *defined* in that specific context. Beginner novels generally include a complete glossary of every word (and sometimes *every form* of every word) that is used in the book, with definitions. Words and constructions that students are less likely to know are glossed in the margins, or in a footnote on the page in which they appear. Some beginner novels also feature vocabulary lists organized by chapter at the end of the book.

² Most teachers and scholars of Latin will agree that “high-frequency” indicates words that are most commonly found in the most-read classical texts. [Dickinson College’s Latin Core Vocabulary](#) is one example of this. Within this context, Latin teachers are developing [sub-sets of high frequency words that are most likely to be used in classroom interactions](#).

HOW IS A BEGINNER NOVEL DIFFERENT FROM A TEXTBOOK OR GRADED READER?

Most of the resources that Latin teachers have at their disposal, even those aimed at first year students, tend to be vocabulary-intensive. It is assumed by the authors and/or textbook company that readers will need assistance with understanding a significant number of words in a given reading. Examples of this can be found throughout Latin textbooks, when ten or even twenty words and phrases are glossed in the space below a relatively short passage.

Beginner novels differ from textbooks and graded readers in both a quantitative way and a qualitative way. In terms of quantity, beginner novels are intended for students who already know most of the vocabulary (either through their previous language work, or by consciously pre-teaching specific vocabulary for a novel). In terms of quality, beginner novels are unique in that the number of new vocabulary words as well as grammatical complexity will not increase from chapter to chapter in a graded systematic way. While there may be a learning curve as students become acquainted with the novel during the first few chapters, there is not an intentional “stepping up” of new vocabulary in each subsequent chapter, as one would find in a textbook reading, or a reader meant to accompany a textbook. As a result, it is expected that students can read subsequent chapters as easily or more easily than the first few chapters.

This difference in approaches reflects the distinction made between *intensive* and *extensive reading*. In simplest terms, an intensive approach is one in which students are working hard with a conscious goal of improving one’s reading and analytical skills. Dan McCaffrey offers a description of an intensive approach that will surely resonate with Latin teachers: “Intensive reading seeks to uncover the inner workings of a text: its grammar, its formal and logical structure, its artistic and rhetorical techniques. This is the way we read a text we are preparing to teach in class” (114). As they read, students are generally working hard to notice, remember, analyze, and apply new vocabulary and grammar rules which are presented either before or after the reading in the textbook chapter. It is assumed that, without the additional help of definitions and explanations, a reading of this sort is well above the current reading level of its intended students.

Extensive reading, by contrast, describes reading for pleasure or for information, where the focus (the *conscious* focus on the part of the student) is not on the

language itself, but on the story, i.e., the content or message of a reading (Day and Bamford). Extensive reading, therefore, involves readings that do not challenge a student's ability to fully comprehend a text. Readings of this sort must contain at least 90% words that the reader already knows in order to be truly comprehensible (Nation; Schmitt, Jiang, and Grabe). The goal of requiring students to read in this way is to reinforce and advance language proficiency through the communication of accessible and interesting content. Because the texts are well within a reader's vocabulary knowledge and grammatical competence, students are more capable of engaging in extensive reading independently, either in or outside of the classroom.

HOW CAN I USE BEGINNER NOVELS?

One benefit of beginner novels is their flexibility: (1) they can be used to supplement and reinforce what students are learning in a textbook-based curriculum, and (2) they can be used to replace a textbook curriculum. Many teachers of modern languages, and some Latin teachers, build their entire curricula around novels (e.g., Maxim), in addition to other readings and activities taken from a variety of sources, including textbooks. Or 3) they can be used outside the primary curriculum as free voluntary reading (see FVR section below).

Another advantage that beginner novels provide to language teachers is more flexibility in dealing with students who are working at different levels. This is especially relevant to teachers of Latin, who are more likely to have two or more levels combined in one class or one room. Combined classes aside, a closer look at student preparedness and ability will often reveal that all classes are mixed-level classes. The result is that students can often be reading at a difference of as many as five grade levels even in their native language.

When the primary classroom resource is a textbook chapter, students who are not able to achieve comprehension of the intentionally graded reading are naturally going to experience difficulty. Strategies like [embedded readings](#) have been developed with a view to mitigating this difficulty. But the fact remains that often teachers have to work really hard to bring all students up to the level of the textbook. Another option is to divide the class into two or more separate classes. But this can place more of a burden on teachers and can undermine classroom cohesion.

When teachers use a beginner novel as a class reading, the common text in the classroom is now something that most students in the room can already read. And the learning goal is no longer such a basic task as simple comprehension, but

is now envisioned as increasingly complex interactions with the reading. It should be noted that adaptations of the reading in both the lower and higher directions may still be necessary or desirable, but the baseline resource is now something that all or most students can access. Raising the bar for the higher performers no longer means simply completing the assignment without assistance or going on to a different reading. Rather, these students will be asked to do more sophisticated language work, including providing spoken or written output which in turn helps their classmates (see [Nielsen](#) for an example of how easy novels offer advanced learners opportunities to achieve higher order thinking about the characters and the plot). The result of a truly differentiated approach to a beginner novel is that, regardless of specific student level and need, *everyone is on the same page*, and so everyone is part of the same conversation and community.

In my own classroom, the teaching of novels has grown out of the way I present any reading, that is, using a variety of strategies which support student comprehension and which allow students to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways. What all these strategies have in common, is that the successful reading of a chapter or a passage, or the entire novel itself, is not the end, but rather the beginning or midpoint of a process whose outcome is the *interpersonal and creative use of the language as communication*. Once basic understanding has been achieved, students are encouraged to use the text as a means to demonstrate a broader form of creative proficiency that is not limited to the book or the text or the vocabulary specific to that book. For example, once students demonstrate basic comprehension through a vocabulary quiz, written translation or summary, drawing or dramatic interpretation of a passage, a next step would be, e.g., for students to brainstorm, discuss, and/or write in the target language about the larger issues at play, such as [Roman virtues](#), as well as reflect on their own experience in comparison with the experience of a character in the reading. [Keith Toda](#) has also developed and shared many such reading-based activities specifically for use by Latin teachers, and has inspired many of my own practices. I have compiled descriptions of my activities and specific materials on [this web page](#). Lindsay Sears has clearly and concisely presented (and generously shared) her [curriculum for teaching the novel *Brando Brown Canem Vult*](#). This document can give teachers a clear glimpse into what the day-to-day process of reading a novel with a Latin class can look like. Other teachers and authors have created and shared sample lesson plans, activities, assessments, etc. for specific novels. Links to these resources, when available, will be included

in the discussion of specific novels below. For more examples of extensive reading activities, see Bamford and Day; Al Ghazali.

FREE VOLUNTARY READING (FVR)

Because beginner novels are designed to be read easily by beginners, they are also appropriate for independent reading by students in their second through fourth years of study (and sometimes later in their first year). Students may read chapters or entire books independently, depending on the teacher's goals and time restrictions. Some studies have suggested that students demonstrate the highest gains in proficiency through reading of self-selected texts. Whereas only a few years ago there were barely any Latin resources that a novice-intermediate level learner could pick up and read on their own, the emergence of beginner novels, as well as many shorter readings shared online, now offers Latin teachers a sizeable library for students to choose from. I have created a [webpage](#) that contains many such texts that are available online. Given the still limited number of Latin resources available, one might more accurately relate this practice to Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). However, because the goal is student enjoyment of reading through choice, FVR is still appropriate for this work-in-progress.

A number of modern language teachers, including [Mike Peto](#) and [Bryce Hedstrom](#), have outlined the process of setting up a FVR library, including the details of routines, student support, accountability and grading (see also Day and Bamford). I have followed the lead of these teachers in establishing my own FVR program, in which beginner novels play a central role. In my classroom, I have instituted a routine in which students begin class twice a week by choosing a book and reading silently for 8-12 minutes. They then spend 4 minutes writing in a reading log. At the end of each semester, students look over their reading logs and write a self-reflection on how FVR has helped them improve in their understanding of the language.

Students can choose from a variety of books which I have collected over the years. These include: Latin textbooks, older elementary readers, *Discitur Legendo* (a printed collection of NLE readings), [student-created myth storybooks](#) (see also Davidheiser), dual-language books like the Loeb Classical Library, childrens' books in Latin translation (Hinke), and other miscellaneous books. While I tend to limit the choices for students in their first year, it is nice to have a variety of texts for students to explore, so that they can find something that is of particular interest to them. The more books I have, the more likely students are to find something interesting. And

if the research on independent reading is true (Grabe; Jacobs et al.), then providing time and books during the school day may be the most effective thing I can do to promote my students' reading proficiency, and hopefully establishing a positive lifetime relationship with Latin books. See [this page](#) for a detailed description and links regarding my evolving FVR procedures.

CONTENT OF BEGINNER NOVELS

Teachers will find a wide variety of subject matter in the novels that are currently available. One concern that has been expressed by some members of the Latin teaching community is that of retaining the classical content of Latin curricula while making the necessary modifications in these materials for the sake of broader access. Many of the currently available beginner Latin novels are in fact based on classical themes. It should be noted, however, that even the novels whose content is not directly related to the ancient classical world offer compelling narratives on themes that are relevant to the lives of young learners, and can easily be related to universal themes in ancient literature. As a result, a knowledgeable teacher will be able to weave in ancient or classical examples of the situations, conflicts and characters that their class will encounter, even in a seemingly irrelevant story.

LATIN NOVELS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE

The purpose of this section of the review is to give teachers an overview of the specific novels currently available. This will include information about suggested level, plot, and unique and total word count. Please note that word counts may be estimated, and reflect different approaches which may exclude different forms, cognates, proper names, etc. Novels are listed in approximate order of difficulty, easiest first. Most of these novels are available through Amazon.com, but additional links have been provided for those that are not, or when supplementary resources are available. If school budgets prevent teachers from acquiring classroom sets, many in our community are willing to share and grant permission to copy or print classroom sets. Please contact these authors and/or publishers directly before deciding that you cannot afford to bring beginner novels into your classroom.

Rufus et Arma Atra, and *Agrippina, Mater Fortis*, by Lance Piantaggini. [Poetulus Publishing](#).

Year 1-2. Rufus: in the first volume, Rufus, the younger brother of Piso (the title and protagonist of Piantaggini's book, see below), becomes involved in the case of some missing weapons from a gladiator fight. This adventure takes the reader through a tour of the monuments of Rome, providing teachers and students with many opportunities for cultural discussion and comparisons. Unique word count: 40. Total word count: 1440. Agrippina: this novel continues the story from the perspective of the mother, Agrippina. She has a secret and eventually reveals herself as a strong and brave character, inviting critical discussion of Roman social norms. Unique word count: 65. Total word count: 2870. The extremely low unique word count in these relatively long books (especially Agrippina) makes for large quantities of fluent reading in the first two years.

Pluto, Fabula Amoris, by Rachel Ash and Miriam Patrick. [Pomegranate Beginnings Publishing](#). Unique word count: 148. Total word count: 1114.

Years 1-2. Pluto tells the story of Persephone from the perspective of a young Pluto who, rather than the aggressor, is the underdog brother of Juppiter, and he ends up with an unexpected and very welcome guest in his lonely home. The book then shifts to the perspective of Persephone as someone who is torn between two worlds. I have taught this book during the second half of Latin 1, and students find the story engaging and entertaining. The supplementary materials available through the website Pomegranate Beginnings are very helpful for teachers to add variety to students' experience of the novel. A companion novel, *Eurydice*, is now available through the same website.

Marcus et Imagines Bonae Suae, by Magaly Rodriguez, translated by Lance Piantaggini and John Bracey. Unique word count: 143. Total word count: 1794. [TPRS Books](#)

Years 1-2. Whereas the Spanish version of this book takes place in Madrid, and the the French version in Paris, this Latin version takes place in modern day Rome. It begins with Marcus, a boy who finds his classes and teachers (especially his Latin teacher!) extremely boring. He then embarks on both real and imaginary adventures which take him outside of the confines of his tedious classes. Roman monuments include the Vatican Museum and the Olympic Stadium, and there is a guest appearance by soccer star Angelo Ogbonna.

Brando Brown Canem Vult, by Carol Gaab, translated by Justin Slocum Bailey. [Fluency Matters](#). Unique word count: 125. Total word count: 3700.

Years 1-2. Brandon wants a dog, but his mother won't let him. He gets a dog anyway, and tries to keep it without mom finding out. The nice thing about having a Latin version of a beginner novel as widely used as *Brandon Brown*, is that many resources already exist, for sale as well as shared freely, which Latin teachers can easily adapt for their purposes. In addition, many Latin teachers have already used this book during the 2016-17 academic year (e.g. [Keith Toda](#), and [Lindsay Sears](#)) and have shared their experiences and resources/strategies for those who want to use the book next year. There is also an official Latin teacher's guide available from the publisher.

Piso Ille Poetulus, by Lance Piantaggini. [Poetulus Publishing](#). Unique word count: 108. Total word count: 2935.

Years 2-3. This book could be used for students in their first year, or for third year students as an introduction to Hexameter verse, or anywhere in between, because of the low unique word count. Piso is a boy who loves to write and read poetry, but his father, a soldier, wants him to learn to fight. Throughout the book, the reader experiences various aspects of ancient Rome (different kinds of columns, famous monuments, the Muses, etc) through words, pictures, and Piso's Latin verses. The book ends with a short and accessible scansion lesson. Piantaggini has added online and CD audio files to support the verse work in this book in addition to his extensive [teacher resources for this book](#), both print and online.

Iter Mirabile Dennis et Debrae, by Christopher Buczek. Self published. Available through Amazon.com. Unique word count: 242. Total word count: 2800.

Years 2-3. Buczek tells the story of two friends who end up with a time machine, and decide to go back to Ancient Rome. There they encounter, among other historical figures, Julius Caesar and an Elephant, both of whom make trips back to the present. The time-travel theme allows for spin-off comparisons between ancient and modern cultures. I have used this book successfully with second year Latin students. Although there is not yet an official teacher's guide, Buczek has created supplementary materials which he is willing to share.

Filia Regis et Monstrum Horribile, Perseus et Rex Malus, Perseus et Medusa. By Stephen Olimpi. Available on Amazon.com. Unique and total word counts: Filia Regis: 125/3771; Perseus et Rex Malus: 300/3391; Perseus et Medusa: 300/3870.

Years 2-3. These three novels are simplified retellings of Greek and Roman myths.

Cloelia: Puella Romana, by Ellie Arnold. Self published. Available on Amazon.com, and free for pdf download (with teacher resources) via the [Latin Teacher Toolbox website](#). Unique word count: 200. Total word count: 4000.

Years 2-4. Ellie Arnold has successfully, in my opinion, created a resource which is accessible to intermediate readers in their second or third year of Latin, and which has an authentic ancient Roman context, with a variety of stories adapted from Livy. This book is unique in that it is written from the perspective of a female adolescent who is beginning to worry about the harsh realities of life as a woman in the Roman world. Two chapters directly address the issue of rape, and in another section, Cloelia's mother is very blunt with her about the fact that in wartime, soldiers capture and kill women and children too. Using this book, teachers can discuss a variety of important and relevant cultural issues in Latin or in English. I have taught this book during the first semester of Latin 3 as a "warm-up" for reading unadapted classical texts.

Dominus Quixotus, by Karen Rowan, translated by David Ring. [Fluency Fast Workshops](#). Unique word count: 270. Total word count: 1160 (applies to each version).

Years 2-4. This is another example of a Latin translation of a pre-existing beginner novel which has been used widely in modern language classes already. In his introduction, Ring makes a compelling case for including *Don Quixote* in a Latin curriculum, namely because of the influence that Latin literature had on Cervantes, and the influences from both traditions that continue into the present day. The format of this book is unique in that it includes two versions of the story, one told in the present tense and one with past tenses. This can potentially allow teachers to read the book with students at multiple levels or even at once with a mixed-level class.

Iter Icari and *Clavis Apollinis*, by William J. Simpson. Available on Amazon.com.

Iter Icari: 22 pages, 250 unique words. *Clavis Apollinis*: 25 pages, 167, unique words.

Years 2-3. Both novels combine Greek and Roman myths, with modern settings that students can relate to.

De Claustro Magico, by Michael Hirschler. Available on Amazon. Contains a full

glossary with both English and German definitions. Unique word count: 235. Total word count: 800.

Years 3-4. A wealthy king wants the best for his daughter, particularly a husband for her who is not greedy. In order to judge the suitors, he places his treasures in a magic chest that knows true love.

Itinera Petri: Flammae Ducant, by Robert Patrick. [Pomegranate Beginnings Publishing](#). Unique word count: 347. Total word count: 4281.

Years 3-4. This novel follows the adventures of Petrus, who one day sees flames circling his head in the mirror, and hears a voice leading him on a mythical adventure. Although the book starts off in the present time, the images and characters Petrus encounters along the way invite comparisons with vocabulary and themes used in ancient Roman literature, as well as other stories and traditions across the world.

Other novels are either currently available, or are in their final edits. For a regularly updated list of beginner novels with links to additional supplementary resources, please visit johnpiazza.net/latin/novels. In addition, James Fassler (jim-bryan65) has reviewed many of these novels on Amazon, and provides a lot of helpful information to anyone interested in finding more Latin resources as a supplement or alternative to traditional textbooks.

WORKS CITED

Bamford, Julian, and Richard Day. *Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Coxon, Michael. "[Joe Nielson – Teaching with Novels](#)." *Optimizing Immersion: Teaching with Comprehensible Input*. 22 Feb 2014. Web.

- Davidheiser, James C. "Fairy Tales and Foreign Languages: Ever the Twain Shall Meet." *Foreign Language Annals* 42.2 (2008): 215-25.
- Day, Richard, and Julian Bamford. *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Al Ghazali, Fawzi. *Extensive Reading Strategies in EFL Classrooms: A Practical Overview for Enhancing Reading Comprehension*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2016.
- Grabe, William. "Extensive Reading." *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. 311-28.
- Hinke, C. J. "A Short Bibliography of Modern Children's Books in Latin." *Classical Outlook* 83.4 (2006): 138-39.
- Hochberg, Ian, ed. [Discitur Legendo: An NLE Latin Reader](#). National Latin Exam, 2015.
- Jacobs, George M., et al. "[Annotated Bibliography of Works on Extensive Reading in a Second Language](#)." The Extensive Reading Foundation. Web.
- Maxim, Hiram H. "A Study into the Feasibility and Effects of Reading Extended Authentic Discourse in the Beginning German Language Classroom." *Modern Language Journal* 86.1 (2002): 20-35.
- McCaffrey, Daniel. "Reading Latin Efficiently and the Need for Cognitive Strategies." *When Dead Tongues Speak: Teaching Beginning Greek and Latin*. Ed. John Gruber-Miller. New York: Oxford, 2006. 113-33.
- Nation, I. S. P. "How large a vocabulary is needed for reading and listening?" *Canadian Modern Language Review* 63 (2006): 59-82.
- Piazza, John. "[Resources for Latin Teachers](#)." JohnPiazza.net. Web.
- Piazza, John. "[Simple Latin Online Reading Resources](#)." JohnPiazza.net. Web.
- Piazza, John. "[Latin Storybook Making Project](#)." JohnPiazza.net. Web.
- Piazza, John. "[Building and Using a Latin FVR Library](#)." JohnPiazza.net. Web.

Schmitt, N., X. Jiang, and W. Grabe. "[The percentage of words known in a text and reading comprehension.](#)" *Modern Language Journal* 95 (2011): 26-43.

Sears, Lindsay. "[Brando Brown Activities Unit Plan.](#)" Web.

Toda, Keith. "[CI Reading Strategies.](#)" *Totally Comprehensible Input*. Web.

Toda, Keith. "[Sheltering Vocabulary.](#)" *Totally Comprehensible Input*. 15 April 2017. Web.