

The Latin Declensions: A Brief Guide by Sean Gabb

English is mostly an “uninflected language” – that is, the relationship between words in a sentence is shown by their position and by the use of prepositions. Nouns only change by adding “s” or “es” or “en” to show plural forms. Verbs mostly change only in the third person singular – *eg*, “I see,” “you see,” “he **sees**.” In Latin – an “inflected language” – relationship is shown mostly by changes to the *ends* of words. Here is a very brief guide to Latin nouns.

The Nominative

The nominative is used for the subject of the sentence:

- **The dog** is in the garden
- **canis** in horto est

The Vocative

The vocative is used when somebody is directly speaking to that object/person:

- “**Septimus**, where are you?”
- “**Septime**, ubi es tu?”

The Accusative

The accusative is used for the object of the sentence, when something is happening directly to it.

- I see **the dog**
- ego **canem** video

It can also be used to express time **during** which something happens:

- **tres horas** in balneo sedi
- I sat in the bath **for three hours**

The Genitive

The genitive is used to show possession. In English, it translates as “of...”

- The house **of the master**
- villa **domini**

It can also show quantity and quality:

- vir est **validissimi**
- He is a man **of the greatest strength**

The Dative

The dative is used to show something being done to or for something else:

- I give the money **to the mistress**
- ego pecuniam **dominae** do

The Ablative

The ablative is similar to the accusative, but is used when something is indirectly happening to the object. In English, the noun is normally preceded by “by,” “with,” “from,” “on,” “under,” and similar words:

- The dog is **in the garden**
- canis **in horto** est

The ablative can also show time **within** which something will or did happen:

- **tribus horis** e balneo surgam
- I shall get out of the bath **in three hours**

The Locative

The locative is used for places in which something happened. It is only used for cities, islands and a few other nouns:

- Is **domi** est
- He is **at home**

The locative case is not listed in tables of Latin nouns, as it has largely disappeared by the Classical period. It is treated as a special part of the ablative case.

On the next page, I give the main forms of the five declensions of nouns. These can be taken *more or less* as applying also to the adjectives. There are differences, but these are easily recognised, and can be explained as and when they are seen.

Note: Many endings are the same for different cases. The reason for this is that Classical Latin grammar is a snapshot of a language in the process of becoming less inflected – some point between the hyper-inflections of its parent Aryan language and its fairly uninflected Italian, French and Spanish children.

The First Declension

Nouns in the first declension are normally feminine, but there are a few exceptions, for example “nauta” and “agricola”. The table shows the six main case forms (not locative), the formation for the noun “puella” and the suffixes that you must add to form any case in the first declension

		<i>puella - girl (f)</i>			
		Singular		Plural	
Nominative	puella	–a	puellae	–ae	
Vocative	puella	–a	puellae	–ae	
Accusative	puellam	–am	puellas	–as	
Genitive	puellae	–ae	puellarum	–arum	
Dative	puellae	–ae	puellis	–is	
Ablative	puella	–a	puellis	–is	

The Second Declension

Nouns in the second declension are normally either masculine or neuter. There are two different tables to learn, one for each of the common second declension genders.

		<i>dominus - master (m)</i>			
		Singular		Plural	
Nominative	dominus	–us	domini	–i	
Vocative	domine	–e	domini	–i	
Accusative	dominum	–um	dominos	–os	
Genitive	domini	–i	dominorum	–orum	
Dative	domino	–o	dominis	–is	
Ablative	domino	–o	dominis	–is	

		<i>templum - temple (n)</i>			
		Singular		Plural	
Nominative	templum	–um	templa	–a	
Vocative	templum	–um	templa	–a	
Accusative	templum	–um	templa	–a	
Genitive	templi	–i	templorum	–orum	
Dative	templo	–o	templis	–is	
Ablative	templo	–o	templis	–is	

The Third Declension

The third declension contains nouns with strange endings, for example “rex” and “mercator”. Consequently, it can contain any gender. However, regardless of gender, all the nouns use the same endings. The best rule for recognising a third declension noun is to look at the nominative singular. If it does not end in “us,” “a” or “er,” it is *probably* third declension.

		<i>rex - king (m)</i>			
		Singular		Plural	
Nominative	rex	<i>no pattern</i>	reges	–es	
Vocative	rex	<i>as nominative</i>	reges	–es	
Accusative	regem	–em	reges	–es	
Genitive	regis	–is	regum	–um	
Dative	regi	–i	regibus	–ibus	
Ablative	rege	–e	regibus	–ibus	

The Fourth Declension

The fourth declension mainly contains masculine nouns. There are not many nouns in this declension, but you need to look out for them, as they can look like second declension nouns

		<i>manus - hand (f)</i>			
		Singular		Plural	
Nominative	manus	–us	manus	–us	
Vocative	manus	–us	manus	–us	
Accusative	manum	–um	manus	–us	
Genitive	manus	–us	manuum	–uum	
Dative	manui	–ui	manibus	–ibus	
Ablative	manu	–u	manibus	–ibus	

The Fifth Declension

The fifth declension does not contain many nouns. Most of the nouns are feminine, but there are exceptions, for example “dies” These nouns often look as if they are third declension.

		<i>dies - day (m)</i>			
		Singular		Plural	
Nominative	dies	–es	dies	–es	
Vocative	dies	–es	dies	–es	
Accusative	diem	–em	dies	–es	
Genitive	diei	–i	dierum	–erum	
Dative	diei	–i	diebus	–ebus	
Ablative	die	–e	diebus	–ebus	