

# Latin in Everyday English [B2]

L'eredità romana è rimasta (sorprendentemente) quasi invariata in alcuni modi di dire latini comunemente usati nell'inglese di tutti i giorni. Vediamo alcuni dei più importanti.

---

All over Europe we often see Latin inscribed above the entrances to churches, cemeteries, museums and other historical buildings. Surprisingly though, there's as much, if not more, Latin used in everyday, modern English than there is in modern Italian, French or Spanish! Although it tends to be used in more written and formal contexts, it is also often found in [casual](#), spoken English too. [Bear in mind](#) that we are referring to pure Latin — not phrases and vocabulary of Latinate etymology.

## HOW TO SPEAK ABOUT TIME

What better place to start than telling the time? The Anglo-Saxon world continues to use Roman time, that is, with the twelve-hour clock, and the distinction between a.m. (ante meridiem) and p.m. (post meridiem). To avoid confusion, English-speakers almost only use 24-hour time at airports, train stations and in the armed forces. In everyday speaking and writing, we hardly ever say 'a.m.' and 'p.m.' This is because we normally understand from the background and context of the conversation whether we are talking about the morning or the afternoon — as in "I'll call you around 2.30". Obviously, no one expects to get a phone call at 2.30 in the morning! And, even if it is not clear from the context, we would normally say something like: "See you tomorrow morning at nine". It is only in formal writing such as newspaper articles or police reports that 24-hour time might be used. Other Latin terms that we commonly use are: 'status quo', meaning 'the existing state of affairs', and 'ad lib', meaning '[unrehearsed](#) or improvised'. [Notice](#), however, that English-speakers use 'ad lib' — an abbreviated form of 'ad libitum', literally 'at one's pleasure' — as a verb or as an adverb: "It is better sometimes to not plan things and just ad lib, or just decide things ad lib." 'Ad

libitum' is not usually used in everyday English. No one says that, except maybe a lawyer trying to impress his or her clients.

## MILLENNIA

Another common Latin abbreviation is A.D. (anno domini) for the year, found in both written and spoken English, as in this example: "The Romans invaded Britain in AD 43". However, many institutions now prefer to use the non-Latin abbreviation C.E. meaning 'Common Era', [to avoid](#) reference to Christianity.

## IN WRITING

There are quite a few other Latin terms that English-speakers use in everyday, common speech and writing. In speaking, one of these is 'et cetera' — which, in written English, is abbreviated to the three letters 'etc.' Another similar use of Latin are the letters 'e.g.', which stand for 'exempli gratia', meaning 'for example'. English-speakers use 'e.g.' regularly in everyday writing. Exactly the same principles apply to 'i.e.', short for 'id est' meaning 'that is', an expression commonly used in both written and spoken English. Another very common Latin expression used in modern, everyday English is 'vice versa'. Again, this is to be found in both everyday speech and writing. For example: "We should help them, and vice versa." This is not just to sound sophisticated or [learned](#), it's just the quickest, most concise option.

## IN BUSINESS

The Latin word 'acumen' has also found its way into modern English, meaning '[keen insight](#)', or 'ability to judge well'; though we usually only find it in the [collocation](#) 'business acumen'. 'Ad hoc' is a relatively formal but still [fairly](#) common Latin term used in both speaking and writing, meaning 'for a particular purpose only'. However, with these last two examples, [we are moving away](#) from common everyday English towards the [realms](#) of more formal and professional English. Other Latin words and expressions less used in common speech, more in writing or formal contexts, are 'versus', meaning 'against' as in a match or a fight, and 'per', as in 'miles per

hour', which is a formal way of saying 'miles an hour'. Other examples are 'per annum', as in '£3,000 per annum' instead of the more common '£3,000 a year'; and 'per head' as in '£2,000 per head' instead of the more informal '£2,000 each'. And even more formal than 'per head' is 'per capita'.

## IN THE COURTROOM

When it comes to professional English, it is the legal profession that is by far the clear leader in using Latin terms. Law students in the UK need to study long lists of expressions such as: 'ad valorem' (according to value), 'affidavit' (he or she has made a [pledge](#)), 'animus revertendi' (intention to return), 'a priori' (from what is earlier), 'bona fide' (in good faith), and so on. Latin words 'alibi' (an adverb meaning 'elsewhere') and 'alias' ([otherwise](#)) are very common, partly thanks to crime movies and TV shows. However, unless you are studying law, or unless you happen to be a lawyer or a judge, these Latin expressions will not be of much use to you. So let's not go on ad infinitum. In conclusion, it is fair to say that English speakers, in everyday speech, do like [to throw in](#) some less commonly used Latin words and phrases occasionally. However, there is a [caveat](#) there — and I say this in bona fide — don't let your alter ego throw Latin terms around per se — just to show how compos mentis you are, or it might have the opposite effect if you do it ad nauseum!

## LATIN MOTTOS

"Dominus illuminatio mea" (Latin for 'The Lord is my light') is Oxford University's motto. Cambridge University also uses Latin for its motto: "Hinc lucem et pocula sacra" meaning 'From here light and sacred knowledge'. It's not surprising that Latin is used for these very old institutions, founded in 1326 and 1209 respectively. And yet, only a few years ago, on January 27, 2017, the futuristic NASA chose the words "Ad Astra Per Aspera" meaning 'A [rough](#) road leads to the stars' as the motto for the exhibit which they opened on that day to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 1 tragedy of 1967, when three American astronauts died in a fire on the [launch pad](#). But it is not only in mottos for institutions that Latin continues to live.

---

# Glossary

- **launch pad** = piattaforma di lancio
- **collocation** = collocazione linguistica
- **to throw in** = inserire
- **caveat** = avvertenza
- **pledge** = promessa
- **Bear in mind** = tenere presente
- **to avoid** = evitare
- **keen** = diligente, scrupoloso
- **unrehearsed** = improvvisato
- **learned** = colto
- **fairly** = abbastanza
- **we are moving away** = allontanarsi
- **realms** = campi, sfere
- **otherwise** = altrimenti
- **rough** = irregolare, ruvido
- **casual** = informale
- **Notice** = notare, accorgersi
- **insight** = conoscenza