

Chapter 15: The Imperfect Tense

Chapter 15 covers the following: the formation of the imperfect tense in all conjugations, the ablative of point in time, and at the end of the lesson, we'll review the vocabulary which you should memorize in this chapter.

There are three important rules to remember in this chapter: (1) the imperfect tense shows incomplete — that is, unfinished, repeated, or habitual — action in the past; (2) the sign for the imperfect tense in Latin is *-ba-*; and (3) the ablative of time shows a point in time and uses no preposition.

This is the shortest chapter and, assuming you've done your work in the past, the easiest chapter we'll cover in all of beginning Latin. Since we've already incorporated the imperfect tense in earlier chapters, there's nothing new to learn here. Here are the imperfect-tense endings in Latin. I'm sure — or at least I hope — you remember them. Adding these endings to a verb base creates a sense of “was doing, used to do, kept on doing.” Remember, please do not use “did” to translate the imperfect yet. Here is a chart showing one verb belonging to each of the four-and-a-half conjugations in the imperfect tense.

The ablative of point in time. Latin uses the ablative case without a preposition to express the specific point in time at which an event occurred, for instance, *tempore illo*, “at that time,” or *horis paucis*, “in a few hours.” To indicate the same, English uses “in, within, on, at.” We'll later learn that the accusative case is used also without a preposition to express duration of time, for example, *tempus illud*, “for — meaning ‘for the duration of’ — that time.” The relationship between the ablative and the accusative here is comparable to the relationship in verbs between the perfect and the imperfect tense: a completed action (a point in time) versus an ongoing action (duration of time). Expressed geometrically, it is the same relationship between a point and an open-ended line segment.

And that's it. That's the end of the grammar for this chapter. How beautiful is life! Onto the vocabulary.

The first word is *Italia, Italiae*, f. It means “Italy.” It's a first-declension noun and it's feminine in gender, a gender it shares with many nouns in Latin which indicate geographical sites: *Roma, Asia, urbs, terra, patria*.

The next word is *pater, patris*, m., meaning “father.” It's a third-declension masculine noun. And be careful! You can see from the genitive singular that the base contracts. It's *patr-*, not *-er-*. Is this noun *i*-stem? No, it's not. So, what is its genitive plural? That's right: *patrum*.

The next word: *miser, misera, miserum*. It means “wretched, miserable, unfortunate.” It's a first/second-declension adjective. Please note that this base does not contract. It stays *miser-* throughout its declension.

The next word is *inter*. It means “between, among.” It's a preposition that takes an accusative object. How would Latin say “among the citizens”? That's right: *inter cives*.

The next word is *itaque*. It means “and so” or “therefore.” It’s an adverb as is the following word *quoniam* which means “since.” There’s really nothing more to say about either of them.

Not so the next word: *committo, committere, commisi, commissum* meaning “entrust” or “commit.” It’s a third-conjugation verb, and obviously you can see it’s a compound of *mitto*: *con-* (which is *cum* in compound form) plus *mitto* meaning “to send together” literally which in Latin produces the sense “entrust.” Thus it takes after it both an accusative direct object and a dative indirect object, for example, “I trust this thing (accusative direct object) to you (dative indirect object).”

The next word *expecto* means “look for, expect.” It’s a regular, first-conjugation verb with no surprises in its formation. There is one minor thing to note about its spelling, however. The base begins *expect-*. That’s sort of redundant. There is an *s*-sound already in the *-x-*. English avoids this redundancy by leaving out the *-s-*: “expect.”

The next word is a very important Latin verb, *iacio, iacere, ieci, iactum*, meaning “throw, hurl.” It’s third *-io* conjugation. The Latin *i-*, did you notice, is pronounced like an English *y* in this word. That’s because it’s next to another vowel. Therefore sometimes it’s spelled with the equivalent of the *y*-sound in Latin, a *j-* in place of an *i-*. Note also the vowel lengthening in the perfect base, *iēci*, but this macron is not mandatory; it does not distinguish between any two forms. More often than not, this verb does not show up in its simple form but as a compound with a prefix attached to the front. Mr. Wheelock provides one example: *ex-* plus *iacio*, producing *exicio, exicere, exieci, exiectum*. It means “throw out,” often in the sense “drive out.” Please note you are responsible for knowing this compound of *iacio*, only one of many important compounds of this verb. We’ll run into several more in this class. Please note also that the fourth principal part is sometimes spelled with a *-j-* and from that we get our English word with its spelling, “eject.” Notice also that the compound base undergoes vowel gradation — we’ve talked about that before — and becomes less colorful, dropping from *iac-* to *ic-*

The next word is *intellego, intellegere, intellexi, intellectum*. It means “understand” and it’s third conjugation. Literally, it means “to choose” *-lego*, “between,” *inter-*. Note that the Romans’ concept of understanding is based upon a sense of separating or discerning. The way I understand this is that, if there are, say, a bunch of blue and red marbles on the floor all mixed up together and if someone can separate the blue ones from the red ones, then that person understands the concept of color. *Intellego* is not the only Latin verb that is based on this sensibility. The verb *scio* which we’ll cover in a later chapter also means “understand, know.” This verb is actually related linguistically to the word “scissors,” a tool for cutting. Note also that the perfect base seen in the third principal part *intellexi* exhibits both vowel lengthening and *-s* to form the past tense, *-x* being the contraction of *-g-* plus *-s*. This is different from the simple verb of which *intellego* is a compound, *lego, legere, legi, lectum*; there is no *-x-* in the perfect. So apparently the Romans forgot that *intellego* was originally a compound of *lego* in the same way that we have forgotten that “behave” is a compound of “have” and thus we do not say “behad” but “behaved.”

The next word is another verb *muto*, first conjugation, meaning “change, alter, exchange.” It’s another regular, first-conjugation verb like *expecto*. And please note the English spelling of “alter.” “Alter” is the verb; “altar” is a religious structure that looks like a table.

And finally, the last word in this vocabulary list is the verb *timeo, timere, timui*. It means “fear, be afraid of.” It’s second conjugation. Note, there is no fourth principal part listed here. That’s because this verb doesn’t have a true passive. If you want to say “be feared” in Latin, you have to use another verb like *terrere*, “to terrify.”

Ten minutes into this presentation and we’re already done. Do the rules that were cited at the beginning of this chapter now make sense to you? If not, please review this presentation — and it won’t take long. If so, please proceed to the next slide.

For the next class exercise, please print out a copy of the practice and review sentences for Chapter 15. You’ll find them on page 73 of Wheelock’s text.

Ut Vergilius ait, “Facilis descensus Averno.”