LEVEL 3 LATIN

The Imperative

Commands, prohibitions, irregular forms and translation practice

THE CENTRAL IDEA An imperative tells someone directly to do—or not to do—something. Latin normally has one form for a command to one person and another for a command to more than one person.

English uses the bare verb: “Be quiet!”, “Sit down!”, “Open your books!”, “Read!” A direct command is not automatically rude; tone and context decide whether it is an order, instruction, request, encouragement or warning.

COMMAND TO...	LATIN NUMBER	MODEL	ENGLISH
one person	singular	portā!	carry!
two or more people	plural	portāte!	carry!

Learning goals

- form singular and plural positive imperatives in every conjugation
- recognise and use the short singulars dīc, dūc, fac and fer
- form negative commands with nōlī / nōlīte + infinitive
- identify the person addressed from a vocative
- recognise common irregular and deponent imperatives
- translate commands naturally and accurately

1 Positive commands: the basic rule

The present active imperative gives a direct command. The subject "you" is understood and is therefore normally omitted. Choose the singular when speaking to one person and the plural when speaking to more than one.

Singular: command to one person

Method: take the present infinitive and remove final -re.

INFINITIVE	REMOVE -RE	SINGULAR IMPERATIVE	MEANING
portāre	portā-	portā!	carry!
monēre	monē-	monē!	warn!
regere	rege-	rege!	rule!
capere	cape-	cape!	take!
audīre	audī-	audī!	listen!

Plural: command to more than one person

The plural is formed by adding -te to the singular imperative. In the third and mixed conjugations, the singular already ends in short -e, so the plural becomes -ite: rege → regite; cape → capite.

SINGULAR	ADD	PLURAL	MEANING
portā	-te	portāte!	carry!
monē	-te	monēte!	warn!
rege	-te → -ite	regite!	rule!
cape	-te → -ite	capite!	take!
audī	-te	audīte!	listen!

Macron check: portā, monē and audī have long final vowels; rege and cape have short -e. The plural forms are portāte, monēte, regite, capite, audīte.

2 Worked examples

LATIN	WHAT TO NOTICE	NATURAL ENGLISH
vīnum portā, Mārce!	portā is singular; Mārce is the person addressed.	Marcus, carry the wine!
servī, vīnum portāte!	portāte is plural; servī addresses several slaves.	Slaves, carry the wine!
puella, magistrum audī!	audī is singular; magistrum is the object.	Girl, listen to the teacher!
mīlitēs, urbem dēfendite!	dēfendite is a 3rd-conjugation plural imperative.	Soldiers, defend the city!
cape tēlum et curre!	both cape and curre command one person.	Take the weapon and run!
epistulās scrībite et ad rēgem mittite!	both commands are plural.	Write the letters and send them to the king!
statim venī, fīlī!	venī is singular; fīlī is the vocative of fīlius.	Come at once, son!
fortiter pugnāte, sociī!	pugnāte is plural; sociī addresses several allies.	Fight bravely, allies!

Translation method: find the imperative first; decide whether it is singular or plural; identify any vocative; then attach objects, adverbs and prepositional phrases.

3 The person addressed: the vocative

A command often names the person being addressed. That noun is vocative, not nominative. It is usually separated by a comma in English and Latin. Most vocatives look like the nominative, but second-declension singular nouns in -us normally change to -e, and nouns in -ius normally change to -ī.

NOMINATIVE	VOCATIVE	WORKED COMMAND	TRANSLATION
Mārcus	Mārce	vīnum portā, Mārce!	Marcus, carry the wine!
dominus	domine	servōs vocā, domine!	Master, call the slaves!
fīlius	fīlī	ad mē venī, fīlī!	Son, come to me!
puer	puer	celeriter curre, puer!	Boy, run quickly!
puella	puella	mē audī, puella!	Girl, listen to me!
mīlitēs	mīlitēs	fortiter pugnāte, mīlitēs!	Soldiers, fight bravely!

Do not make the vocative control the verb: the imperative itself already shows whether one person or several are being addressed. The vocative merely names them.

4 Four short irregular singulars

Four common verbs lose the expected final -e in the singular. Learn the memory line dīc, dūc, fac, fer. Their plural forms are mostly regular, though ferō has the irregular plural ferte.

VERB	EXPECTED—but wrong	CORRECT SINGULAR	PLURAL	MEANING
dīcō, dīcere	dīce	dīc!	dīcite!	say! / tell!
dūcō, dūcere	dūce	dūc!	dūcite!	lead! / take!
faciō, facere	face	fac!	facite!	do! / make!
ferō, ferre	fere	fer!	ferte!	bring! / carry!

MEMORY LINE **dīc, dūc, fac, fer**

dīc mihi, Mārce! Speak to me, Marcus! *(mihi is dative: "to me".)*

dūc captīvum ad rēgem! Lead the prisoner to the king! *(captīvum is the object; ad rēgem shows destination.)*

fac hoc statim! Do this immediately! *(hoc is neuter singular: "this".)*

fer mihi vīnum, puer! Bring me the wine, boy! *(fer is singular; mihi means "to me".)*

dīcite mihi nōmina vestra! Tell me your names! *(the command addresses several people.)*

ferte tēla ad mūrum! Carry the weapons to the wall! *(ferte is the irregular plural of fer.)*

5 Negative commands: “do not…”

At this level, the normal way to forbid an action is nōlī + present infinitive when speaking to one person, or nōlīte + present infinitive when speaking to more than one. The infinitive does not change.

COMMAND TO…	FORMULA	MODEL	TRANSLATION
one person	nōlī + infinitive	nōlī currere!	do not run!
more than one	nōlīte + infinitive	nōlīte currere!	do not run!

Worked prohibitions

LATIN	ENGLISH	WHY?
nōlī clāmāre, puer!	Do not shout, boy!	one person; clāmāre stays infinitive
nōlīte discedere, mīlitēs!	Do not leave, soldiers!	several people; discedere stays infinitive
nōlī tēlum iacere!	Do not throw the weapon!	one person; tēlum is the object
nōlīte captīvōs interficere!	Do not kill the prisoners!	several people; captīvōs is accusative plural
nōlī hoc facere!	Do not do this!	use facere after nōlī—not the imperative fac
nōlīte vīnum ferre!	Do not carry the wine!	use ferre after nōlīte—not the imperative ferte

Common error: do not write nōlī curre or nōlīte currite. After nōlī / nōlīte, Latin requires the present infinitive: currere.

Advanced note

In more advanced Latin, nē with a perfect subjunctive can also express a prohibition, especially a sharp one: nē fēceris, “do not do it”. For this handout, use nōlī / nōlīte + infinitive unless a question specifically asks for another construction.

6 Other useful irregular forms

VERB	SINGULAR	PLURAL	MEANING / NOTE
sum, esse	es!	este!	be!
eō, īre	ī!	īte!	go!
ferō, ferre	fer!	ferte!	bring!; both forms irregular
volō, velle	—	—	no ordinary present imperative; use a different expression
nōlō, nōlle	nōlī!	nōlīte!	be unwilling!; used with an infinitive for prohibitions

es fortis! Be brave!

este laetī! Be happy! — to several males or a mixed group

ī ad forum! Go to the forum!

īte ad oppidum! Go to the town!

7 Extension: deponent imperatives

Deponent verbs have passive-looking forms but active meanings. Their imperatives therefore look like passive imperatives. The singular usually ends in -re; the plural usually ends in -minī. Translate them actively.

VERB	SINGULAR	PLURAL	TRANSLATION
hortor, hortārī	hortāre!	hortāminī!	encourage!
loquor, loquī	loquere!	loquiminī!	speak!
sequor, sequī	sequere!	sequiminī!	follow!
proficīscor, proficīscī	proficīscere!	proficīsciminī!	set out!
ingredior, ingredī	ingredere!	ingrediminī!	enter!

Worked deponent examples

sequere mē! Follow me! *(one person)*

sequiminī ducem! Follow the leader! *(several people)*

loquere clārē! Speak clearly! *(one person)*

proficīsciminī statim! Set out immediately! *(several people)*

nōlī loquī! Do not speak! *(negative command still uses the infinitive loquī)*

> **Recognition rule:** a form such as sequere may look passive, but the dictionary entry sequor, sequī tells you that the verb is deponent and the meaning is active.

8 A reliable method

STEP	QUESTION	EXAMPLE: NŌLĪTE TĒLA IACERE, MĪLITĒS!
1	Is the command positive or negative?	negative: nōlīte
2	One person or several?	several: nōlīte and mīlitēs
3	What is the commanded action?	iacere — to throw
4	What belongs with the action?	tēla — the weapons
5	Is anyone directly addressed?	mīlitēs — soldiers!
6	Natural English?	Soldiers, do not throw the weapons!

Common traps

TRAP	CORRECTION
Translating an imperative as “you carry”	Translate it as a direct command: “carry!”
Using a singular form for several people	Choose the plural, normally ending in -te or -ite.
Writing dīce, dūce, face or fere	Learn the short singulars: dīc, dūc, fac, fer.
Putting an imperative after nōlī / nōlīte	Use the present infinitive: nōlī currere.
Treating a vocative as the subject	The subject “you” is understood; the vocative names the addressee.
Translating deponent forms passively	Translate actively: sequere = “follow!”

9 Test A: Latin into English

Underline every imperative. Mark S for singular or P for plural. Circle any vocative, then translate into natural English.

1. vīnum portā, Mārce!

_____

2. servī, epistulās ad rēgem portāte!

_____

3. mē audī, puella!

_____

4. mīlitēs, urbem fortiter dēfendite!

_____

5. cape tēlum et sequere mē!

_____

6. dīc mihi nōmen tuum!

_____

7. dūcite captīvōs ad prīncipem!

_____

8. fac hoc statim!

_____

9. ferte auxilium ad oppidum!

_____

10. nōlī clāmāre, puer!

_____

11. nōlīte tēla iacere, mīlitēs!

_____

12. es fortis, fīlī!

_____

13. īte ad forum et magistrum exspectāte!

_____

14. loquere clārē!

_____

15. proficīsciminī statim, sociī!

_____

10 Test B: English into Latin

Choose singular or plural carefully. Use a vocative where one is supplied. All vocabulary is drawn from the cumulative Level 3 material or explained in this handout.

16. Marcus, carry the wine!

_____

17. Slaves, carry the letters to the king!

_____

18. Girl, listen to me!

_____

19. Soldiers, defend the city bravely!

_____

20. Take the weapon and follow me!

_____

21. Tell me your name!

_____

22. Lead the prisoners to the chief!

_____

23. Do this immediately!

_____

24. Bring help to the town!

_____

25. Boy, do not shout!

_____

26. Soldiers, do not throw the weapons!

_____

27. Son, be brave!

_____

28. Go to the forum and wait for the teacher! — several people

_____

29. Speak clearly! — one person; use loquor

_____

30. Allies, set out immediately! — several people; use proficīscor

_____

11 Test C: Forms and corrections

Correct each faulty Latin command. Then explain the error in a few words.

31. Mārce, vīnum portāte!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

32. mīlitēs, urbem dēfende!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

33. dīce mihi!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

34. face hoc!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

35. fere vīnum!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

36. nōlī curre!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

37. nōlīte clāmāte!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

38. puerus, venī!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

39. sequē mē!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

40. sociī, proficīscite!

Correction: _____

Reason: _____

12 Answer key

Test A

41. Marcus, carry the wine! (S)
42. Slaves, carry the letters to the king! (P)
43. Girl, listen to me! (S)
44. Soldiers, defend the city bravely! (P)
45. Take the weapon and follow me! (S + S)
46. Tell me your name! (S)
47. Lead the prisoners to the chief! (P)
48. Do this immediately! (S)
49. Bring help to the town! (P)
50. Boy, do not shout! (S)
51. Soldiers, do not throw the weapons! (P)
52. Son, be brave! (S)
53. Go to the forum and wait for the teacher! (P + P)
54. Speak clearly! (S)
55. Allies, set out immediately! (P)

Test B

56. vīnum portā, Mārce!
57. servī, epistulās ad rēgem portāte!
58. mē audī, puella!
59. mīlitēs, urbem fortiter dēfendite!
60. cape tēlum et sequere mē!
61. dīc mihi nōmen tuum!
62. dūc captīvōs ad prīncipem!
63. fac hoc statim!
64. fer auxilium ad oppidum!
65. nōlī clāmāre, puer!
66. nōlīte tēla iacere, mīlitēs!
67. es fortis, fīlī!
68. īte ad forum et magistrum exspectāte!
69. loquere clārē!
70. proficīsciminī statim, sociī!

Test C

71. Mārce, vīnum portā! — one person requires the singular.

72. mīlitēs, urbem dēfendite! — several people require the plural.
73. dīc mihi! — dīcō has the short irregular singular dīc.
74. fac hoc! — faciō has the short irregular singular fac.
75. fer vīnum! — ferō has the short irregular singular fer.
76. nōlī currere! — use the infinitive after nōlī.
77. nōlīte clāmāre! — use the infinitive after nōlīte.
78. puer, venī! — the vocative of puer is puer, not puerus.
79. sequere mē! — the deponent singular imperative is sequere.
80. sociī, proficīsciminī! — the deponent plural imperative ends in -minī.

13 One-page revision grid

JOB	ONE PERSON	MORE THAN ONE	MODEL
positive regular command	singular imperative	plural imperative	portā / portāte
3rd or mixed conjugation	-e	-ite	rege / regite; cape / capite
four short irregulars	dīc, dūc, fac, fer	dīcite, dūcite, facite, ferte	dīc mihi / ferte tēla
negative command	nōlī + infinitive	nōlīte + infinitive	nōlī currere / nōlīte currere
be!	es	este	es fortis / este laetī
go!	ī	īte	ī ad forum / īte ad forum
deponent command	usually -re	usually -minī	sequere / sequiminī

Final checklist

- Have I decided whether the command addresses one person or several?
- Have I recognised a positive command or a prohibition?
- After nōlī / nōlīte, have I used the infinitive?
- Have I checked dīc, dūc, fac and fer?
- Have I identified any vocative?
- If the verb is deponent, have I translated it actively?
- Have I preserved the macrons?

CORE SUMMARY Regular singular: infinitive minus -re. Regular plural: singular + -te, with -ite in the 3rd and mixed conjugations. Negative: nōlī / nōlīte + infinitive. Irregular memory line: dīc, dūc, fac, fer.