A NEW JOB FOR NOUNS

The Ablative Case

A simple first guide to how prepositions control its meaning

The central rule

You must learn the ablative form because the ablative has special uses in Latin. In the sentences in this first handout, however, most of the meaning is supplied by the preposition. Change the preposition and you change the meaning of the whole phrase — and often of the whole sentence.

From a small sentence to a fuller one

nauta ambulat. — The sailor walks.

This tells us **who** does the action, but nothing more.

nauta cum puellā ambulat. — The sailor walks with the girl.

cum puellā adds a companion.

nauta in viā ambulat. — The sailor walks in/on the road.

in viā adds a place.

nauta ab īnsulā nāvigat. — The sailor sails away from the island.

ab īnsulā adds a starting point.

A useful way to think

The ablative ending tells you that the noun is in the ablative case. The preposition normally tells you what that ablative phrase means. Both parts are necessary.

The form stays; the meaning changes

nautae ex īnsulā festīnant. — The sailors hurry out of the island.

nautae ab īnsulā festīnant. — The sailors hurry away from the island.

The noun form **īnsulā** has not changed. Only the preposition has changed — but the meaning has changed from **out of** to **away from**. Why, then, does Latin bother with having this ablative case when it seems to do nothing? There are two answers to this. **First**, Latin has an ablative case because it has always had an ablative, and languages can be conservative – usually, they do not change quickly. **Second**, there are times when the ablative is used without a preposition, though you will not see this for a while.

Name: _____

1. How to recognise and form it

At present, all the nouns you are learning belong to the **first declension**. The ablative endings are therefore very simple.

Job	Singular	Plural	Usual idea
Nominative	puella	puellae	subject
Accusative	puellam	puellās	object
Ablative	puellā	puellīs	used after special prepositions

The two endings to learn

Singular: -ā

Replace -a with a long -ā: puella → puellā; īnsula → īnsulā; nauta → nautā.

Plural: -īs

Replace -ae with -īs: puellae → puellīs; īnsulae → īnsulīs; nautae → nautīs.

The macron matters

puella ambulat. — The girl walks.

puella is nominative: the girl is the subject.

cum puellā ambulat. — He or she walks with the girl.

puellā is ablative: the long ā marks the new case.

Memory line

ONE: -ā. MORE THAN ONE: -īs.

All your present nouns follow the same pattern

agricolā, ancillā, aquā, deā, fēminā, fīliā, hastā, incolā, īnsulā, īrā, nautā, patriā, poētā, puellā, rēgīnā, sagittā, terrā, viā

One new noun used in the comparisons

villa, -ae, f. = house; ablative singular villā.

Name: _____

2. The five prepositions to learn first

A preposition is a small word placed before a noun. In these early sentences, it does most of the work of telling you what the ablative phrase means.

Preposition	Main meaning	Question it answers
ā / ab + abl.	away from, from	From where?
ē / ex + abl.	out of, from inside	Out of what?
cum + abl.	with	With whom?
in + abl.	in, on	Where?
sub + abl.	under, underneath	Under what?

Why are there two forms?

Use **ab** and **ex** before a vowel. The extra consonant makes the words easier to say.

ab īnsulā — away from the island

ex īnsulā — out of the island

ā terrā — away from the land

ē terrā — out of the land

Do not confuse ā/ab and ē/ex

ā/ab describes movement away from a place. ē/ex more strongly means movement from inside to outside. At this early stage, translate the difference clearly even when English could simply use “from”.

The pattern

preposition + noun in the ablative — ā + terrā; cum + nautīs; in + viā; sub + terrā

3. Place: in + the ablative

Question: where?

Use in + ablative when the action stays in a place. There is no movement into it.

agricola in terrā labōrat. — The farmer works on the land.

puella in viā ambulat. — The girl walks on the road.

nauta in īnsulā cantat. — The sailor sings on the island.

fēminae in viīs festīnant. — The women hurry on the roads.

puellam sub villā spectō. — I watch the girl underneath the house.

agricolae sub terrā labōrant. — The farmers work underneath the land.

Compare the prepositions

Puellam in villā spectō = I watch the girl in the house. Puellam sub villā spectō = I watch the girl underneath the house. Only the preposition changes, but the place described is completely different.

A warning for later

Latin can also use **in + accusative** for movement into or onto a place. You do not need to practise that construction here. For this handout, **in + ablative answers "where?"**

4. Company: cum + the ablative

Question: with whom?

Use cum + ablative for a person who accompanies someone.

puella cum fīliā ambulat. — The girl walks with the daughter.

agricola cum nautā labōrat. — The farmer works with the sailor.

rēgīna cum ancillīs ambulat. — The queen walks with the slave-girls.

poēta cum incolīs cantat. — The poet sings with the inhabitants.

Let the preposition speak

cum tells you that the ablative noun is a companion. Replace cum with in, sub, ā/ab or ē/ex and the same noun form will be understood differently.

Name: _____

5. “With me”: the special pronoun forms

With the pronouns **ego, tū, nōs, vōs**, Latin puts cum on the end. Learn these four forms as complete words.

Pronoun	With-form	Meaning
ego	mēcum	with me
tū	tēcum	with you (one)
nōs	nōbīscum	with us
vōs	vōbīscum	with you (more than one)

puella mēcum ambulat. — The girl walks with me.

tū nōbīscum labōrās. — You work with us.

vōs mēcum cantātis. — You all sing with me.

Say this, not that

mēcum — not cum mē; tēcum — not cum tē; nōbīscum — not cum nōbīs; vōbīscum — not cum vōbīs.

6. Separation: ā/ab and ē/ex

nauta ab īnsulā nāvigat. — The sailor sails away from the island.

nautae ā terrā nāvigant. — The sailors sail away from the land.

fēmina ex īnsulā nāvigat. — The woman sails out from the island.

nōs ē patriā nāvigāmus. — We sail out of our homeland.

7. Change the preposition; change the meaning

The ablative form must be correct, but it does not by itself tell you whether the phrase means in, under, with, out of or away from. The preposition supplies that information.

ex īnsulā nautae et rēgīna festīnant. — The sailors and the queen hurry out of the island.

ab īnsulā nautae et rēgīna festīnant. — The sailors and the queen hurry away from the island.

puellam in villā spectō. — I watch the girl in the house.

puellam sub villā spectō. — I watch the girl underneath the house.

agricolae in terrā labōrant. — The farmers work on the land.

agricolae sub terrā labōrant. — The farmers work underneath the land.

What should you notice?

In each pair, the ablative noun stays exactly the same: īnsulā, villā or terrā. The changed preposition changes the relationship and therefore changes the meaning of the sentence.

What these prepositional ablatives can do — for now

Job	Latin pattern	Example idea
Place	in + ablative	in/on the road
Position below	sub + ablative	under the house
Company	cum + ablative	with the sailor
Separation	ā/ab or ē/ex + ablative	away from/out of the island

Why the case must still be learned

The preposition does most of the work in these early examples, but it requires the noun after it to be ablative. Latin also has special ablative uses that you will meet later. Therefore you must learn both the preposition and the ablative form.

A five-step method

1. Find the preposition. It will carry most of the meaning.
2. Ask what the preposition means in this sentence.
3. Choose singular or plural.
4. Use -ā for one and -īs for more than one.
5. Translate the preposition and noun together as one complete phrase.

Name: _____

Practice A — Spot the ablative phrase

Underline the preposition and its ablative noun. Then translate the complete phrase.

1. puella in viā ambulat.

2. nauta cum agricolā labōrat.

3. puellam sub villā spectō.

4. fēminae ab īnsulā nāvigant.

5. poēta cum puellīs cantat.

6. agricola in terrā labōrat.

7. agricolae sub terrā labōrant.

8. nōs ē patriā nāvigāmus.

Practice B — Choose the correct ending

Complete each noun with -ā or -īs.

1. cum puell___ (more than one)

2. in vi___ (one only)

3. ab īnsul___ (one only)

4. cum naut___ (more than one)

5. sub vill___ (one only)

6. ē patri___ (more than one)

7. in terr___ (one only)

8. cum rēgīn___ (more than one)

Name: _____

Practice C — Translate into English

1. agricola cum fīliā ambulat.

2. nautae ab īnsulīs nāvigant.

3. puella mēcum cantat.

4. rēgīna in viā festīnat.

5. puellam sub villā spectō.

6. tū nōbīscum labōrās.

7. poēta cum incolīs clāmat.

8. nōs ē patriā nāvigāmus.

Practice D — Translate into Latin

1. The girl walks with the sailor.

2. The farmers work on the land.

3. I watch the girl underneath the house.

4. The sailors sail away from the island.

5. The poet sings with the girls.

6. We hurry on the road.

7. You (one person) work with us.

8. The farmers work underneath the land.

Name: _____

Final mixed translation

1. The queen and the girl walk with the sailors on the road.

2. The farmers work underneath the land, but the girls work on the land.

3. We sail away from the islands, and you (more than one) sail with us.

4. The poet sings with the inhabitants, but the women shout.

5. The slave-girls hurry out of the house with the queen.

6. I watch the girl in the house, but you watch the girl underneath the house.

Final check

- Can you explain why the ablative form must be learned?
- Can you also explain why changing only the preposition changes the meaning?
- Can you choose correctly among in, sub, cum, ā/ab and ē/ex?

Name: _____