

# THE SPELLING OF LATIN WORDS

There are two main ways of spelling and printing Latin: academic and ecclesiastical. The academic form is used primarily by those in public schools, colleges and universities, while the ecclesiastical form was used until recently by the Roman Catholic Church. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the replacement of Latin in many liturgical texts by vernacular languages, the remaining Church Latin has tended to be written in the academic manner.

This is a pedantic mistake.

The academic form pretends to imitate the writing of the ancient Romans. This is seen primarily in the semivowels written in English with the letters “W” and “Y.” The Romans used “V” for both sounds /W/ and /U/ in monuments written in stone, but “U” on paper (papyrus). (The change in pronunciation to the sound of the English consonant “V” for the semivowel came towards the end of the Empire.) In its extreme form, the academe uses the upper-case letter “V” for “U” when capitalized, and the lower-case letter “u” for “v” when not. Thus, the Latin word for “vulnerable,” which is written in ecclesiastical Latin respectively as “VULNERABILIS” or “vulnerabilis,” is found in many British academic texts as “VVLNERABILIS” and “uulnerabilis.” No distinction is made in writing between them, and the academics pronounce the semivowel as English /W/.

Most academic editors do not go so far. But many are quite inconsistent: they will print “VVLNERABILIS” in capitals, but “vulnerabilis” in lower case.

But virtually all academics omit the use of the letter “J.” This letter was introduced during the period 1350-1600 (the renaissance) to designate the semivowel written in English as the letter “Y”: whereas modern academics use only the letter “I” (and “i” in lower case). Thus, the name for the first month of the year is written academically as “Ianuarius,” as opposed to ecclesiastical “Januarius,” and the word for “justice” is written respectively as “iustitia” and “justitia.” (The Romans, by the way, placed no dot atop the lower-case “i.” Thus in that way, too, “iustitia” deviates from ancient writing.)

The academic practice is full of inconsistencies. To begin with, among the great number of modern English words derived from Latin we use *j*, not *i*: we spell “conjecture,” not “coniecture” (Latin conjectura versus coniectura). This usage makes it easier for young people to learn Latin when we print *j* in the dictionaries and textbooks we use, since the *j* (and *v*) forms are already so familiar to them. This fact alone means that, in learning to *speak* Latin (i.e., *use* it), rather than merely reading it, the Anglophone learner will have an easier time.

Next, the ancient Romans wrote in a way foreign to us today. As Clive Brooks, an English scholar points out in his *Reading Latin Poetry Aloud* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 24): “...with

manuscripts written in capitals or uncials (rounded capitals), without punctuation and *with no spaces between the words*, even experienced readers must have needed to practice a bit.” (Brooks’ italics.) Thus, if we want to write in true Roman style, let us compare the beginning lines of the Apostles’ Creed in Latin. The English is

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ His only Son, Our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.

The different forms in Latin would be as follows:

Original Roman	Ecclesiastical
CREDOINDEVMPATREM OMNIPOTENTEMCREAT OREMCAELIETTERRAEE TINIESVMCHRISTVMFIL IVMEIVSVNICVMDOMIN VMNOSTRVMQVICONCE PTVSESTDESPIRITVSAN CTONATVSEXMARIAVI RGINEPASSVSSVBPONTI OPILATOCRVCIFIXVSM ORTVVSETSEPVLTVS	Credo in Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, Creatorem cæli et terræ. Et in Jesum Christum, Filium ejus unicum, Dominum nostrum; qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine, passus sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus, mortuus, et sepultus.

Next we can consider the ecclesiastical use of the digraphs Æ (æ) and Œ (œ), both of which are pronounced as English

“long A” as in the word “rate.” In Roman times, these were spelled separately as “AE” and “OE,” and were pronounced as diphthongs /ai/ and /oi/. But in the Middle Ages they coalesced into monophthongs (single sounds), and their modern English descendants are so pronounced, e.g., “preposition” from Latin “præposition-” and “economy” from Latin (originally Greek) “œconomia.” The ecclesiastical spelling and pronunciation is much closer to modern English practice, and hence easier for English speakers to use.

An additional benefit of using “æ” and “œ” is that it is also easier to tell from sight alone when foreign words such as “Israel” (i.e., Isra-el) and “Michael” (Micha-el) are to be pronounced with the “A” separate from the “E,” since the two letters are themselves separate.

Thus the ecclesiastical form of spelling is the preferable way to write and learn Latin. And it is through the reading and praying of ecclesiastical Latin that we can enter into mystical resonance with the many centuries of devout prayer by the Roman Catholic Church and more intimately join in the communion of the saints.