

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Layers of Language:
The Latin Layer of Language –
Letter-sound Correspondences & Syllable Patterns

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Lecture Notes

The Latin language was the language of ancient Rome, and of Latium, an old country in Italy. When Julius Caesar conquered the English Isles in 54 C.E., few Latin words entered the language as the Romans departed quickly, not to return for almost a century. Then, however, they stayed for about 400 years. Celtic and Latin were both spoken. Only the place names such as *Manchester* and *Lancaster* exist today, based on the Latin root *castr*, meaning *camp*. More Latin-based words came into the language during the Renaissance in the 14th and 15th centuries.

The Latin vocabulary was felt to be more stable and polished and more capable of conveying both abstract and humanistic ideas than was a fledgling language like English. Further, Latin was something of a lingua franca that leaped across geographical and political boundaries.
(Hanna, Hodges, & Hanna, 1971, p. 47)

The Latin-based languages, often called the Romance languages, come from Italy (Italian), Portugal (Portuguese), Spain (Spanish), France (French), and Romania (Romanian).

Like words from all languages, Latin-based words in English contain letter-sound correspondences, syllable patterns, and morpheme patterns.

Latin Letter-sound Correspondences

The letter-sound correspondences found in words of Latin origin are very similar to those found in the Anglo-Saxon based words. Single letter consonants and consonant blends are the same, as are the short and long vowel sounds. Happily, these Latin-based words use few of the vowel digraphs that are often troublesome to students with reading problems.

One feature of Latin words is the common use of the **schwa**. The symbol (ə) represents the schwa, the neutral vowel sound in an unaccented syllable. It corresponds to the grapheme (or symbol/letter) *a* in *awake*. Any vowel can be

schwaed. For example, in the word *excellent*, the 2nd and 3rd *e*'s are schwaed as the 2nd and 3rd syllables are not accented.

Words with the schwa sound are not necessarily difficult to read. However, spelling a word with schwa sounds is harder as the speller does not hear a true short or long vowel sound.

Latin Syllable Patterns

Syllable patterns are much like those found in words of Anglo-Saxon origin. Latin word roots most often have a short vowel as in *rupt*, *struct*, and *dict*; a vowel-consonant-*e* as in *scribe* and *vene*; and *-r* controlled as in *port* and *form*. Syllable division is similar to that found in Anglo-Saxon words. Often a reader will find the VC/CCV division as in *dis/tract*, *in/spect*, and *per/spire*. We generally divide after prefixes as in *re/fect*, *pre/tend*, and *de/scribe*. However, syllable division doesn't always occur between the root and the suffix. For example, in *disruption* we divide between the *p* and the *t*, not after the *t*; in *attractive*, we divide between the *c* and *t*; in *prescription*, we divide between the *p* and *t*.

Teachers need to provide several activities related to identifying the schwa sound, and dividing words into syllables for student practice.