



Golden Rules for translating Latin

There are a few golden rules for translating Latin accurately, and if you follow them, you won't go far wrong.

1. Look at the verb first

Nothing in a sentence makes any sense – and never will – until you know **WHAT IS HAPPENING**.

In Latin the verb is normally at the end of the sentence or clause. Find it!

2. Check the verb ending

Knowing **WHAT** is happening in a sentence is vital; but you also need to know **WHO IS DOING IT**. The key information for this is contained in the verb ending.

Look at that verb again and find out which **person** it is in: 1st, 2nd or 3rd; and which **number**, i.e. whether it is singular or plural. As a guide to this, the following verb endings apply to the vast majority of Latin verbs:

1 st person singular	-O (or -M)	I
2 nd person singular	-S	You (singular)
3 rd person singular	-T	He, she, it
1 st person plural	-MUS	We
2 nd person plural	-TIS	You (plural)
3 rd person plural	-NT	They

3. Find the subject

Now that you know the person and number of the verb, we are ready to find out **WHO** is doing the verb (i.e. the subject). So here we go:

- If the verb is **1st person singular**, the subject **must** be: **I**
- If the verb is **2nd person singular**, the subject **must** be: **you (singular)**
- If the verb is **1st person plural**, the subject **must** be: **we**
- If the verb is **2nd person plural**, the subject **must** be: **you (plural)**

So with four of these, we have the answer already. With the 3rd person singular and plural, it is a little more complicated, but only a little:

- If the verb is **3rd person singular**, the subject is *either He, she or it or a noun in the nominative singular*
- If the verb is **3rd person plural**, the subject is *either they or a noun in the nominative plural (or two or more nouns in the nominative joined together by 'and')*.

4. Find the nominatives

Ok, so if our verb is 3rd person, we need to find whether or not there is a noun in the nominative case. Luckily for us, the most usual place to put a noun in the nominative case is at the very beginning of the sentence, so that's the place to look.

But remember, you are only looking for nouns in the nominative if your verb is 3rd person. Don't waste time on this if it isn't, because you will make a mistake.

5. Pause for a breather

Once you are sure – really sure – that you know what is happening in the sentence, and who is doing whatever it is, you can take a breather. The rest of the sentence is now going to be easy, so you can afford a little lie-down. But just before you get back to work, have another check. Be absolutely sure that you have followed the rules in Step 3 above, because if you haven't, you will go wrong.

6. Find the object

All sentences must contain a subject and a verb, but a very large number also contain an **object**. The object is the person or thing to whom the action of the verb is being done. The object goes in the **accusative case**, so all you need to do now is find any nouns in the accusative case.

Beware however; nouns following prepositions (e.g. *ad agrum*, or *in villam*) do not count. They are in the accusative simply because the preposition they follow is followed by the accusative, **not** because they are the object.

7. Translate: subject, verb, object

You now have the main framework for your sentence: subject, verb, object. You know **who** did **what** to **whom**. Write it all down before you forget it.

8. Do the rest - carefully

Now that you have broken the back of the sentence, the rest should just fall into place. But you can still go wrong, so take care. Look at the endings of the remaining words, and translate them accurately, in the **cases** that they are in. Don't just throw them in any old how.

Now it's your turn

If you follow these rules, you will never go wrong in your translating from this wonderful language.

For full details of how to translate Latin accurately, have a look at my *So you really want to learn Latin* course, available from www.galorepark.co.uk. And if you get stuck, just send me an email to Latin@galorepark.co.uk and I'll see if I can help.

Nicholas Oulton