A Very Brief History of the English Language (and it's relation to Latin)

? (who knows – a loooong time ago) B.C. - 42 A.D.

Until the year 42 A.D. the island of Britain (which would someday be called England and would give birth to the language of English) was inhabited by various Celtic tribes. The Celts shared a common basic culture and language, and different tribes of Celts once lived all over Europe (and even into Asia). The Celts were not an “empire” or “country”, and some groups of Celts absolutely hated other Celts and had different lifestyles. In Britain, there were many different tribes, all with their different customs, but sharing that basic Celtic culture and language, even if they didn’t always get along. The English language is not directly related to Celtic, but has borrowed some Celtic words. But at that time, English didn’t even exist in any form!

43 A.D. - 409 A.D.

In 43 A.D., the Romans (a group of people originally from the central Italian city of Rome but who by this point had spread throughout the Mediterranean Sea area and beyond) decided that they wanted to add the mineral and agricultural wealth of the island of Britain into their empire. After years of fighting and setting up cities filled with their own people (and filled with “Romanized” Celts), the Romans settled down for a 400 year stay in Britain. The Celtic language became less used (although it is still alive and well even today in modern Wales), and Latin became the dominant language of the island for four centuries. But still no sign of “English”.

410 A.D. - 1065 A.D.

By the year 410 AD, the Roman Empire was crumbling. Barbarian tribes were moving in from Asia and were fighting for land, and the Roman government had been run very poorly for many years. The Roman emperor finally decided that it was not worth the effort to maintain Britain as part of the empire anymore. Its people (who had been very “Romanized” by this time) were left to defend themselves and would no longer have the Roman army, the famous legions, to keep the peace. It was a time of great fear and uncertainty.
Remember those “barbarian” invasions mentioned above? Well, they kept on happening even after the Roman Empire fell in 476 AD. A few groups of Germanic barbarians (so called because their languages belonged to a large related language family call “Germanic”) moved into Britain, and by around 600 AD tribes of Saxons, Angles and others had made Britain their home, kicking out or overpowering the previous population. So while Latin was dying out in Britain because of the rise of these “Anglo-Saxon” people, these same groups of Germanic speaking peoples were giving rise to a new language - **Old English**.

Old English was a combination of various Germanic languages (most notably the language of the tribe of the Angles, which gives us the name “English”), which looked and sounded very different than modern English.

**Modern English “Lord’s Prayer”**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

**Old English “Lord’s Prayer”**

æder ure þu þe eart on heofonum; Si þin nama gehalgod to become þin rice gewurпе ðin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum. urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg and forgýf us ure gyltas swa swa we forgýfað urum gyltendum and ne gelæd þu us on costmunge ac alys us of yfele soplice

Over time, English continued to evolve and change, as all languages do. Some Latin words snuck into the language when Christianity came back in force to the island in the late 5th century A.D., and of course some Latin had already been adopted when the Germanic people took over the old Roman provinces in Europe. But the massive change in English comes with the next big wave of invaders to the shores of Britain, the **Normans**.

**1066 A.D. – around late 1400’s A.D.**

In 1066 A.D., French speaking people from northern France, descendents of certain Viking tribes called the Normans, invaded Britain from Northern France (the area of Normandy, hence their name). These Normans were led by William the Conqueror, and brought to England not only their own customs and system of government, but also their Old French language. And guess what language Old French directly developed from? That’s right! LATIN!! So Latin made its triumphant return to the island of Britain, and **it is from this point on that Latin becomes forever mixed with English**. Our modern English language begins to develop at this time, slowly at first but picking up speed as the Normans become more and more in control of England.

The language of English is a strange mixture - it has a Germanic grammar structure (the way its sentences work) but increasingly its vocabulary became a mix of Anglo-Saxon and Latin/French. That is why English remains such a hard language for non-native speakers to learn - it combines bits and pieces of other languages all rolled into one strange mix!! During this period, many words being to have two different forms: a native "Germanic" Anglo-Saxon form, and a "Normanized" Latin-French form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anglo-Saxon form</th>
<th>Latin-French form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pig</td>
<td>pork</td>
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<td>cow</td>
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late 1400s A.D. – modern times

English continued to grow and evolve, becoming more and more like the English you are used to today. A general change in vowel sounds (called the Great Vowel Shift, or the Great Vowel Movement if your humor lies in THAT direction) that occurred at this time caused English to sound less like it’s Germanic cousins and more like it’s Latin ancestor. During the Renaissance and into modern times, new scientific and other intellectual words became and are still becoming part of our common English language. These new words almost entirely came from Latin (or Greek) origins. New words are being made all the time, using Latin as a guide!

Doctors all over the world use Latin terms in their medical practices. Biologists, Chemists and other scientists name new organisms and compounds after Latin words. Writers of all kinds concoct new words using Latin roots. Lawyers use Latin terms to discuss the law. Advertising agencies use Latin root words to sell their products. The entertainment industry finds inspiration for films and TV shows from Classical history and mythology. Basically, you can’t go anywhere or do anything with Latin being part of your life!!

Some reasons for kids to learn Latin

- Helps improve your English grammar
- Helps you improve your logic and thinking skills
- Students who study Latin do noticeably better on the SAT, and in school on general
- Taking and learning Latin looks very impressive on your college applications

Quotes concerning the importance of Latin in various fields

Law
"Law schools report that by yardsticks of law review and grades, their top students come from math, the Classics, and literature - with political science, economics, "pre - law," and "legal studies" ranking lower" (Harvard Magazine, May-June, 1998, p. 50)

Business
"...shrewd employers, including many in the City, still prefer job-applicants whose minds were formed by Aeschylus(Greek author) or Horace (Latin author)" (London Times, 11 April 1991)

Medicine
"So much of medical terminology is rooted in the Classics that studying Latin and Greek can facilitate study of anatomy for instance. But studying the Classics opens other doors that physicians tend to have closed just by the focused interest of their studies. Classics can be a vehicle for staying in touch with life - spiritual growth by reading the New Testament in its original language or cultural growth by reading Virgil." (Dr. Eric Dahl, Director, The University of Mississippi Student Health Service)

Writing
"It took Latin to thrust me into bona fide alliance with words in their true meaning. Learning Latin...fed my love for words upon words, words in continuation and modification, and the beautiful accretion of a sentence...." (Eudora Welty, One Writer's Beginnings, p. 31)

"It allows you to adore words, take them apart and find out where they came from." (Theodore Geisel (Dr. Seuss), NY Times, 2 March 2004)

Technology
"If they could return to their undergraduate days, many IT workers say they would spend less time with Unix, networks and Windows and put more effort into getting to know Virgil (a Roman author), Plato, Virginia Woolf and Pablo Picasso. Nearly 40% of IT workers said that they would major in a nontechnical subject area if they could return to college, according to a new
survey..." (CNN interactive, 4 July 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>&quot;...the sharpest appetite is for Latin majors...Recruiters are eager to find college graduates who majored in Latin because high school students in significant numbers continue to want to study it.&quot; (LA Times, 5 October 1999)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American History</td>
<td>&quot;One of the regrets of my life is that I did not study Latin. I'm absolutely convinced, the more I understand these eighteenth-century people, that it was that grounding in Greek and Latin that gave them their sense of the classic virtues: the classic ideals of honor, virtue, the good society and their historic examples of what they could try to live up to.&quot; (David McCullough, Historian and author, on understanding the Founding Fathers <a href="http://www.neh.fed.us/whoweare/mccullough/interview.html">http://www.neh.fed.us/whoweare/mccullough/interview.html</a>)</td>
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"To read the ... Latin authors in their original is a sublime luxury...I thank on my knees him who directed my early education for having in my possession this rich source of delight."

-Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Priestly
January 27, 1800

Hey, if learning Latin was good enough for Thomas Jefferson, it's good enough for you!!

An ancient text in Latin - notice no spaces between words and no punctuation!!! Ouch!!