

# Latin Abbreviations

One of the best descriptions of what scholars should aim for in their writing is in the opening sentences of *A Handbook for Scholars*, by Mary-Claire van Leunen. She says:

Scholarly writing is formal, accurate, and allusive. It has to be. It does not have to be wooden, finicking, and cabalistic.

Latin abbreviations are one of the easiest ways to make your writing wooden, finicking and cabalistic. And that's assuming that you use them correctly. Many people don't. Before you write that Latin abbreviation, consider that there are two reasons why you probably shouldn't use it. One, because you should try not to use Latin in your writing. Two, because you should try not to use abbreviations in your writing.

## What is wrong with Latin?

We all know writers who *obscurum per obscurius*, and don't we all want to say to them: *naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret*? See how irritating Latin can be? Especially when you suspect that all the writer did was flip to the "Foreign Words and Phrases" section of the dictionary, as I just did. Always try to write in English.

Occasionally you'll hit a snag. Some other language will have a marvelously trenchant way of expressing something and there will be no good way to say it in English.

Sturm und Drang  
zeitgeist  
femme fatale  
in vitro

Then you can use the word or phrase. How often? Knowing how often you can use foreign words without sounding pretentious is part of the art of writing. It comes with practice. Good writers tend to spend a lot of time searching for shorter, fresher Anglo-Saxon ways to express themselves.

## What's wrong with abbreviations?

Abbreviations don't usually belong in text ("text" meaning the straight prose that makes up most of your work, as opposed to bibliographies or tables). They are graceless and they are informal. They send a message that you are dashing this off in such haste that you don't have time to spell things out.

There is a place for abbreviations. It is conventional to use certain types of abbreviations in non-text matter: in footnotes,

bibliographies, tables, and other compilations of raw data. You can even use them a little bit within parentheses in the main body of your text, but here you have to begin asking yourself why? What purpose would the abbreviation serve? What is wrong with spelling the thing out?

In text, there is one grand exception where abbreviations may be used, and that is in technical, scientific text. A lot of archaeology is scientific, so this is an exception you'll encounter quite frequently. But even this exception is reserved for the sections of text that are highly technical. For example, when you're giving lots of precise measurements you can use "m" instead of spelling out "meters." But in other sections of the very same book, when you're not using measurements in any precise, quantitative way, you spell out the word.

So that gives us the basic rule on Latin abbreviations: they generally don't belong in text. Use them in parenthetical matter, in footnotes, in appendixes, in bibliographies, in tables, and in other non-text places where conciseness and brevity are valued ahead of grace and elegance.

## Italics or no?

The modern, American convention is not to italicize scholarly Latin words. This is the rule used by the University of Chicago Press, long considered the arbiter of taste in the academy. This means don't italicize i.e., e.g., passim, et al., in vitro, cf., non sequitur, ad libitum, ad infinitum, ad nauseum, etc. (The University of Chicago makes a few exceptions, usually in cases where not italicizing might cause the reader a few seconds of confusion.) Italicize only lengthy or less common Latin phrases.

Now let's look at some of the more common Latin abbreviations and what they're good for.

## etc.

Etc., or et cetera, means "and so on." If that's what you mean, say "and so on."

We worked our way through the alphabet, starting with A, then B, and so on, until we came to V and got tired of looking.

When you say "and so on," your reader should have a good idea of what you're leaving out. Don't say something like "She reacted to the bad news with anger, hostility, and so on [or etc.]." What's "and so on"? Resentment? Silence? Crude

gestures? Death threats? Hunger strikes? Anger and hostility has no “and so on.” It’s not part of a finite set.

#### **i.e. and e.g.**

Some people have trouble keeping them straight. The former means “that is” and the latter means “for example.” It’s impossible to mix them up when you say them in English, and there is really no reason not to say them in English.

He was asked not to leave town that week (that is, until after the inquest).

The police were suspicious for several reasons (for example, the lock had recently been changed).

If you must use *i.e.* and *e.g.*, use them within parentheses, and in technical-sounding contexts.

#### **ca.**

This is short for *circa*, which is Latin for “around.” In addition to the synonym “around,” we also have in the English language some other equivalents: “about,” “approximately,” “close to,” “nearly” and several more. *Circa* should be used for dates anyway. So don’t say something like: The site was *ca.* five hectares. Simply say the site was about five hectares, or the site was a little over five hectares, or the site was big (nearly five hectares). There’s nothing wrong with using “*ca.*” for dates, but it usually works best in parentheses.

The pottery was clearly from the Rivera phase (*ca.* A.D. 500-700).

#### **The reference abbreviations: *ibid.*, *cf.*, *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*, *viz.*, *et al.***

Should you use them at all, and if so, how? One hundred years ago, these abbreviations were part of a complicated but well-known reference lexicon used by scholars everywhere. Scholars immediately recognized “*loc. cit.*” the way we recognize “RAM” today. Gradually this reference system has fallen into disuse and decay. The only one that is truly alive is *et al.*

#### ***et al.***

*Et al.* means simply “and others,” and is often used to truncate a long list of authors.

There really isn’t a rule on how to use *et al.* You can use *et al.* in your text citation, but list all the authors in your actual bibliography, but certainly don’t hesitate to use it in the actual bibliography too if it’s one of those papers authored by a committee of twenty. You can use *et al.* for things authored by four or more people, or you can make the cut at three people. Some people believe in spelling out everyone the first time you refer

to them and some people say you can jump right in there with *et al.* the very first time. Since here at the Museum we publish individual monographs, we don’t have a house style, but do try to be consistent on how you use *et al.*

#### ***ibid.***

This is isn’t quite dead yet, though you can certainly get along without it. *Ibid.*, which means the previous reference, is still used a little bit. If you’re one of those people who really likes it, go ahead and use it. The advantage is that it can save space—if you cite “Reichel-Dolmatoff and Proskouriakoff 1960” two times in a row, the second time you can say *ibid.* In fact, you can keep saying *ibid.* until some other reference comes into the picture.

But on the other hand, what if it’s just “Lee 1980.”? *Ibid.* doesn’t always save enough space to get excited about, and when you use it, you force your reader to scan up the page to recall whom you were talking about.

And while you’re at it, check to make sure you’re not over-citing. You might be, if you spend a lot of time wondering if you should use *ibid.*

#### ***op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*, *viz.*, *vide*, *q.v.***

These are dead. Don’t use them. They annoy people.

#### ***cf.***

This is short for *confer* (note the one period). This means “compare.” It means something different from just plain “see,” or “see also.” It means you’re pointing out a source that contradicts you, or perhaps puts a slightly different spin on things. If you’re going to use this one, do use it correctly. Remember, also, that there’s no shame in spelling out in plain English that it’s a contradictory source (“see Smith 1995 for an entirely different conclusion based on the same data”). If it’s important enough to point out a contradiction, it might be an interesting by-way.

#### **Conclusion**

Latin was for a long time the universal language of scholarship in the Western world. Even a hundred years ago, scholars were supposed to be seriously fluent in it. That time passed, though. When words and phrases fall into disuse to such an extent that people misuse them as often as they use them correctly, it’s time to retire them. So most of these words and phrases above should probably be retired.

The good news is that none of these words describe deep concepts that have no English equivalents. In some cases, the English equivalent takes no more space than the Latin. In others, such as *cf.*, using English might spur you to explain an interesting sidelight.