

Latin Terms and Abbreviations

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What this handout is about

This handout will explain Latin terms and abbreviations you may see in academic writing and demonstrate how to use the most common ones correctly in your own writing.

About Latin terms and abbreviations

Despite the fact that Latin is no longer the international language of scholars, bits and pieces of it can still be found scattered around. Some of these bits are very common and are even seen in non-academic writing, while others are much more obscure.

Simply knowing what an abbreviation stands for and how to translate the underlying Latin words does not necessarily tell you how the abbreviation is used in actual modern practice. These little remnants of Latin have had a long and colorful life separated from their original language and context.

There are a few generally accepted rules that apply to most Latin abbreviations. The major style manuals (MLA, APA and Chicago) agree that Latin abbreviations should be kept out of the main body of a text—that is, they should not appear in ordinary sentences within ordinary paragraphs. Certain abbreviations may be used in parentheses within the body of a text (etc., e.g., i.e.), but the rest should appear only in footnotes, endnotes, tables, and other forms of documentation. One notable exception: APA style allows writers to use the abbreviation et al. when discussing works with multiple authors and v. in the titles of court cases.

Except for N.B., none of the abbreviations we're about to discuss need to be italicized or capitalized.

Why should you bother learning about Latin abbreviations?

While it's perfectly acceptable to use English phrases instead of Latin abbreviations, there's a reason why these abbreviations have survived and continue to be used today: they contain a lot of meaning in a very small package. It takes less time and fewer characters to write e.g. than "for example." As an added bonus, using Latin abbreviations correctly can make your writing sound more sophisticated and scholarly.

Even if you decide that you don't want to use Latin abbreviations in your own writing, you're still going to encounter them in other texts. Knowing what these abbreviations mean and how

they are used is crucial to understanding and interpreting these works.

The big three: etc., i.e., and e.g.

The average person could go through life never having to worry about most Latin abbreviations, but there are three that have become so widespread that they're impossible to avoid: etc., i.e. and e.g. These are also the most often misused Latin abbreviations. Let's take a look at each of them, what they mean and how they can be used.

etc.

The abbreviation etc. stands for *et cetera*, which translates literally as "and others" or "and the rest." A more useful translation that can be substituted for etc. (especially when reading aloud) is "and so on." It is used at the end of a list to indicate that there are more elements to the list that are being left out so that the list doesn't become too long. For example:

All of the objects in our solar system (planets, comets, etc.) orbit the sun.

Many other examples could be included in a list of objects in our solar system (like asteroids and moons), but it would take too much space and time to list them all. Also, listing them all wouldn't add much to the sentence-readers don't need to know the identity of every object orbiting the sun in order to understand the sentence.

In lists where you use etc., be sure all the listed items are of the same kind. If you wrote the following sentence, your readers might have a hard time telling what "etc." is substituting for because some of the items listed are objects, while others are people or activities:

I'm very interested in astronomy—planets, stargazing, Carl Sagan, etc.

When etc. is used at the end of a list, it should be preceded by a comma just like the other elements of the list. It should never have the word "and" before it: the Latin word *et* has already got that covered.

e.g. and i.e.

These are the two most often misused and confused Latin abbreviations—and for good reason. In any given sentence, it's often not immediately clear how i.e. and e.g. are different. Both appear inside parentheses and offer extra information that helps explain what's come before. There is, however, a very important and useful difference between these two abbreviations.

The abbreviation e.g. stands for *exempli gratia*, which translates literally as "for the sake of an example"—but you can really just cut out the stuff in the middle and read it as "for example." It is used to give an example or set of examples to help clarify the preceding idea. In general, if you use e.g., you should provide one or two short examples. More can be used, but only if they are simple and can be expressed in a single word or short phrase. It isn't necessary to use etc. at the end of a list following e.g.; it's understood that there are more examples than those that

you've given. You should not list *all* of the possible examples.

The abbreviation i.e. stands for *id est*, which translates literally as "that is." Sometimes it might be more useful, however, to translate it as "what that means is" or "that is to say." This abbreviation is used to clarify the preceding idea by restating it more simply or in different terms. Strictly speaking, what follows i.e. in parentheses should be equivalent to what comes before—you should be able to switch them without changing the meaning of the sentence. If this involves making a list, you should include all of the elements that make up that list. It might be useful to think of i.e. as representing an equal sign (=). This will help you remember that i.e. stands for a strict equivalence.

Let's look at some examples of how to use i.e. and e.g. correctly:

YES *The rocky planets (e.g., Mercury) are closest to our sun.*

NO *The rocky planets (i.e., Mercury) are closest to our sun.*

Mercury is not equivalent to the rocky planets—they're not the same thing. Mercury is just one example of a rocky planet, therefore e.g. is appropriate.

YES *The rocky planets (i.e., Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars) are closest to our sun.*

YES *Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars (i.e., the rocky planets) are closest to our sun.*

NO *The rocky planets (e.g., Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars) are closest to our sun.*

Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars are all of the examples of rocky planets in our solar system (they are a full and complete list, not just a few examples), so e.g. should not be used. Instead, use i.e. to show that the list of four planets is equivalent to *the rocky planets*—they refer to the same thing. Notice that switching *the rocky planets* and *Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars* doesn't change the meaning of the sentence.

In some instances, i.e. and e.g. may both be acceptable, but using one or the other will drastically change the meaning of the sentence. For example:

Farmer Brown sells his produce (e.g., apples, oranges, carrots) at the market.

Farmer Brown sells his produce (i.e., apples, oranges, carrots) at the market.

In the first sentence, the use of e.g. tells the reader that Farmer Brown sells many different types of produce, including apples oranges and carrots. The information contained in the parentheses provides a few examples to help clarify the meaning of produce. In the second sentence, the use of i.e. tells the reader that Farmer Brown sells *only* apples, oranges and carrots —nothing else. The information contained in the parentheses tells the reader that, as far as Farmer Brown is concerned, apples, oranges and carrots are what constitute produce—they are equivalent.

Other useful abbreviations

While etc., e.g. and i.e. are perhaps the most important Latin abbreviations for you to get

acquainted with, there are other less common abbreviations that you may find useful in certain situations.

N.B.

The abbreviation N.B. stands for *nota bene*, which literally translates as “note well,” although in practice you can read it as “pay attention.” It is used in endnotes or footnotes to call the reader’s attention to a particularly important piece of information—such as a key assumption of or exception to an argument—that is nevertheless not crucial enough to be included in the main body of the paper. Also, notice that N.B. is the only Latin abbreviation that should be capitalized.

Example: N.B.: While all of the study participants were interviewed about their prior medical histories, researchers did not have access to their medical records to confirm the accuracy of self-reported data.

cf.

The abbreviation cf. stands for the Latin word *confer* which means “compare.” It is primarily used in endnotes or footnotes to point the reader to works that offer an argument which contradicts or is otherwise different from the author’s argument. Therefore, it might be more useful to read cf. as “but compare this to.” It is generally preceded by citations of works that agree with the author’s argument and then followed by one or two examples of works that disagree with or somehow differ from the argument. Although it is not strictly necessary to explain how these works are different, you might find it useful to include a short phrase for the benefit of your reader.

Example:

2. Jones 1992, Smith 2003; cf. on methodology Harris 2005.

sic

Although it is not an abbreviation, sic is included here because it is one of the more frequently used Latin terms. The word sic means “thus” or “so” and is used in quotations to indicate that any strange aspects of a piece of text, such as errors in grammar, spelling, or word choice, are part of the original text and not a typo. Therefore, it could be more appropriately translated as “yes, that’s actually what it says.” Depending on the style you’re using, sic is italicized and placed in brackets after the word or phrase it identifies (as in APA and Chicago), or it is simply placed in parentheses after the entire quote (as in MLA). Consult the most recent edition of the appropriate style handbook to ensure that you’re using the proper format.

versus (vs. or v.)

You have probably seen the term versus or one of its abbreviation, vs. or v., in the names of court cases (for example, “Smith v. the State of North Carolina”). Versus translates as “against” or “as opposed to.” Versus is used to express conflict or comparison. You may see it in the main

body of academic texts, in phrases such as “man versus nature,” “measured in kilograms versus pounds,” or “protectionism versus free trade.” Versus and its abbreviations also appear frequently in the titles of books and articles.

circa

Circa, which translates as “around” or “approximately,” usually appears with dates. You may see it abbreviated as c. or ca. (or, more rarely, as cca. or cir.). It indicates that a number or value is approximate, not exact. For example, you might see sentences like “the construction of Stonehenge began circa 3000 BCE.” More rarely, you may see circa in reference to measurements of amounts, such as “circa \$45,000” or “c. 1.5 mL.” Your meaning will often be clearer to readers if you stick with English in the main body of your text and save “c.” for things in parentheses and notes. So, for example, you might write “the construction of Stonehenge began around 3000 BCE” or “when Stonehenge began to be constructed (c. 3000 BCE).”

Citation shortcuts

The abbreviations in this section are used primarily in notes and bibliographic entries in order to save space. It is important to understand these abbreviations not only so that you can correctly interpret bibliographic citations, but also so that your citations can be accessible to your readers.

et al.

The Latin abbreviation et al. stands for *et alii* which translates as “and other people.” It is like etc., but it is used only for people. You will generally see et al. used in bibliographical entries for books, articles, or other publications that have several authors (usually four or more) in order to save space. In such cases, the name of the first author will be given in full and then followed by et al. As with etc., there is no need to include ‘and’ before et al., but do notice that unlike etc. there is a space (and no period) after et in this abbreviation.

ibid. and id.

The abbreviation ibid. stands for the Latin word *ibidem*, which means “in the same place.” It is used in endnotes or footnotes when you cite the same source and page number(s) two or more times. If you cite the same source but a different page number, you can use ibid. followed by a comma and the page number(s). Also, note that ibid. is capitalized when it begins a note. For example:

1. Barsby, 99-101.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 97.

Although it is becoming less common, you may encounter the abbreviation id. used in a way similar to ibid. The abbreviation id. stands for *idem*, which means “the same person.” It is used in place of ibid. when the same author is cited but not the same page number. In such

instances, *ibid.* is only used to repeat the preceding citation exactly. For example:

1. Barsby, 99-101.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Id.*, 97.

passim

Like *sic*, *passim* is not an abbreviation, but it is included here as a Latin term commonly used to save space in bibliographic entries. The Latin word *passim* means “here and there” or “throughout.” It is used when a particular word, phrase or idea is not restricted to just a few pages of a work, but occurs in many different places. Using *passim* is not a way to avoid providing specific citations-instead, it indicates to the reader that the information being cited occurs frequently in the work and that he/she may want to use the table of contents or index to find specific examples.

Abbreviation obscurity

While you may occasionally encounter the following abbreviations in your academic career, they are becoming increasingly rare. There is no need for you to attempt to incorporate them into your own writing. Instead, use short English phrases; it will be easier for you to write and for your reader to understand!

loc. cit. and op. cit.

The abbreviations *loc. cit.* and *op. cit.* are old forms used in bibliographic citations similar to *ibid.* and *id.* above. The abbreviation *loc. cit.* stands for *loco citato*, which translates as “in the place cited,” whereas *op. cit.* stands for *opere citato* which translates as “in the work cited.” Generally, *loc. cit.* is used to refer to the same work and page number(s) as the previous citation, while *op. cit.* refers only to the same work and may or may not be followed by page numbers. In all modern style manuals, *ibid.* is preferred to *loc. cit.* and *op. cit.*

inf. and sup.

The abbreviations *inf.* and *sup.* stand for the words *infra* and *supra*, which translate as “below” and “above” respectively. They are used to indicate that information will be more fully explained or cited elsewhere. If the information has already appeared in an earlier note, *sup.* is used. If the information will appear in a later note (where a more complete citation or explanation is perhaps more appropriate), *inf.* is used. In general, you can replace both of these abbreviations with “see below” and “see above” without any change in meaning.

viz. and sc.

The abbreviation *viz.* stands for the Latin contraction *videlicet* which translates literally as “it is permitted to see,” but a more useful translation is “namely” or “that is to say.” It is used to clarify something by elaborating on it, giving a detailed description of it, or providing a

complete list. In this sense, *viz.* is similar to *i.e.*, although *viz.* tends to emphasize the precision and exactness of what follows and is thus a stronger version of *i.e.* It is generally acceptable to use *i.e.* instead of *viz.*

The similar abbreviation *sc.* stands for the Latin contraction *scilicet* which translates literally as “it is permitted to know,” but a more useful translation is “namely” or “as if to say.” It is often used to provide a clarification, remove an ambiguity, or supply an omitted word. Like *viz.*, *sc.* is a more specific version of *i.e.* and stresses the clarity of what follows. As with *viz.*, it is generally acceptable to use *i.e.* rather than *sc.*

q.v.

The abbreviation *q.v.* stands for *quod vide*, which translates literally as “which see,” although in practice it means something more like “for which see elsewhere.” It is used in notes after a word or phrase to indicate that more information can be found about the topic somewhere else in the current work. Because *q.v.* is generally used in reference books or similar works, page numbers are not included after it. The reader is expected to know how to locate this information without further assistance. Since there is always the possibility that the reader won’t be able to find the information cited by *q.v.*, it’s better to use a simple English phrase such as “for more on this topic, see pages 72-3” or “a detailed definition appears on page 16.” Such phrases are immediately comprehensible to the reader (who may not even know what *q.v.* means) and remove any ambiguity about where additional information is located.

s.v.

The abbreviation *s.v.* stands for *sub verbo*, which translates as “under the word.” It is used when citing a specific entry in a dictionary or encyclopedia. The word or phrase following the abbreviation should correspond exactly to the heading in the dictionary or encyclopedia so that the reader can find the precise entry being indicated. Since *s.v.* is no longer recognizable to most modern readers, it is better to use a simple English phrase such as “see the Oxford English Dictionary; look under grape” or something similar.

We hope that this handout will be useful to you as you decipher the Latin terms and abbreviations in your reading and perhaps begin to use them in your own writing!

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