

Formation of the Perfect Stems: Why are they so unusual?

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Article Difficulty Rating: Beginner

Introduction

When Latin students first encounter the perfect tense, the number of principal parts for verbs suddenly doubles. To add to this complication, these new parts appear to be formed at random... or are they? This tutorial is designed to explain why Latin developed these irregular verbal parts and hopefully to attune the reader to how verbs, and even words in general, are formed.

Patterns of the Perfect Tense

Hopefully, anyone who has encountered many verbs will have noticed that there are patterns for the forms of most of the conjugations. If you haven't noticed any patterns, or if you haven't been able to discern quite what they are, or if you would just like to check, here are the *regular* patterns for the perfect tense stems:

First Conjugation: -avi -atum

examples:

amo, amare, amavi, amatum

curo, curare, curavi, curatum

exception:

do, dare, **dedi**, datum

Second Conjugation: -ui -itum

examples:

moneo, monere, monui, monitum

taceo, tacere, tacui, tacitum

exception:

compleo, complere, **complevi**, **completum**

Third Conjugation: -i -tum or -sum

examples:

duco, ducere, duxi, ductum

capio, capere, cepi, captum

tollo, tollere, sustuli, sublatum

ago, agere, egi, actum

tendo, tendere, tendi, tensum

exception:

They're all exceptions!

Fourth Conjugation: -ivi -itum

examples:

audio, audire, audivi, auditum

finio, finire, finivi, finitum

exception:

sentio, sentire, **sensi, sensum**

your grammar/text may differ in the gender of the perfect passive or "fourth principle part" but the gender is really irrelevant in this context.

The first conjugation is the only class that is actually considered to have a regular paradigm, but with the second and fourth, you will find that those listed as examples are by far the most commonly occurring forms. As you can see, the Third Conjugation really is full of irregularity in its perfect tense forms, except in that it will still always *end* in those certain sets of letters, as do all of the other conjugations. Therefore, this tutorial will mainly focus on how the *Third Conjugation's* perfect stem is formed.

Understanding Why the Sounds Change: Part I

There are very many reasons why a letter and the sound which it represents can mutate into something that seems completely foreign. These abnormalities occur in every word of the Third Conjugation, and occasionally in the other conjugations.

The most drastic mutation, but also a very rare one is suppletion, the collision of words. This is the case with just a handful of words, such as "tollo, tollere, sustuli, sublatum" in which half of the principle parts look completely alien to the other half. This is not by mere chance, but it is because two words which evolved separately from one another have fused into one very strange word. It may not seem like such a strange thing for words to do when we realize that some of our words, such as "go / went / gone" and "be / am / are / is / was / were / been" (that was a mouthful), are even more severe cases of this phenomenon.

One of the more common types of change is the weakening of consonants. It is very hard to pronounce a **G** correctly when we place it before certain letters such as **T** or **S**. Try saying "agtum" quickly and you will find that the natural inclination is to say something closer to "actum", which is the word that the Romans preferred as well. So, with the word "ago, agere", we take the stem of the word ("ag-") and juxtapose the perfect passive ending (-tum), and receive the much feared "agtum"; we then weaken the **G** to a **C** and all becomes peaceful once again. You can observe this sort of change quite often in verbs (and also nouns and compound words), such as "rego, regere": we take "reg-" and add "-tum" which gives us "regtum", but we do not like this so we turn it into "rectum", which is indeed the fourth principle part of "rego, regere, rexi, rectum". This same exact rule applies to many other verbs, such as "intellego, intellegere" (see if you can guess what the fourth part will be if you don't already know).

This is the way that consonants are usually weakened in Latin:

G becomes **C**

D becomes **T**

B becomes **P**

"Scribo, scribere, scripsi, scriptum" is a perfect example of how the stem ending in **B** becomes **P** before certain consonants.

Understanding Why the Sounds Change: Part II

Another prevalent mutation of verbs within the Third Conjugation is the combination of letters. This combination is simply when a **G**, **C**, **H**, or a consonantal **V** are placed before an **S** and become an **X**. It is very common in the Third Conjugation that the third principle part ends in **-SI**. Therefore, if the present stem of the verb ends in **G**, **C**, **V** or **H**, you should not be surprised if the third principle part suddenly has an **X** there. The present stem of "duco, ducere" is "duc-"; to form the perfect stem we often (but *not* always) add an **S** to the present stem; so we take the stem "duc-", add an **S** and now we have "dux-". This explains why we have the parts "duco, ducere, duxi, ductum". Another example we can find in "traho, trahere"; its stem is "trah-", we add an **S**, and we now have "trax-"; "traho, trahere, traxi, tractum" (H+S=X). To show how it works with a **G**, let's take "rego, regere"; the stem is "reg-", we add an **S**, and we have "rex-"; our forms are then "rego, regere, rexi, rectum" (and this verb also demonstrates consonant weakening in the fourth part). Try to predict the forms of these verbs: "diligere" and "dico, dicere".

There also exists a type of change which just drops letters altogether, this is fairly common. We have the word "mitto, mittere, misi, missum"; in this word, there are two cases of omission. "Misi" is actually the stem "mit-" (Latin doesn't end words in double consonants, so "mitt-" is out of the picture) with an **S** added to the end to create "mits-", but for certain reasons, this was unacceptable, so the **T** was omitted. In the fourth part of the verb, we see almost the same thing: the stem "mit-" plus the ending "-sum", but instead the **T** is assimilated to **S**, which gives us "missum" (compare this to how prefixes are assimilated). There are also verbs like "vinco, vincere, vici, victum" in which the **N** has probably just been lost in both of the perfect forms (to make them... perfect?).

Yet another method of creating perfect stems is to simply maintain the present stem without adding an **S**. This can be seen in verbs like "tendo, tendere, **tendi**, tensum (tend-sum)" and "defendo, defendere, **defendi**, defensum (defend-sum)".

With a few verbs, the vowels may weaken. There are many ways in which they may change, these are a few:

- An **A** may become an **I**
- An **AE** may become an **I**
- An **E** may become an **I**

Just remember that in certain words, like "ago, agere, egi, actum" or "facio, facere, feci, factum", the abnormal vowel in the third part is just a weakened **A**.

Reference Tables

Here is a compilation of most of the raw data that I have gone over in the article. This is no definitive resource, but hopefully it will serve useful for anyone who has not yet memorized the variations between related Latin words.

Compound Consonants

| Component 1 | Component 2 | Result | Example |
|-------------|-------------|--------|-----------------------|
| C | S | X | duco duxi (duc-si) |
| V | S | X | vivo vixi (viv-si) |
| H | S | X | traho traxi (trah-si) |
| G | S | X | rego rexi (reg-si) |
| D or T | S | Z | zona (d-sona) |

I listed Z solely for the sake of how it is pronounced. Latin will never create a Z where a D or T is followed by an S, but it is still a dual consonant consisting of those two letters, found usually, if not always, in words of Greek origin.

Vowel Weakening

| Original | Result | Example |
|----------|--------|--------------------------|
| A | E | ago egi (agi) |
| A | I | capio accipio (ad-capio) |
| AE | I | caedo cisum (caesum) |
| E | I | lego diligo (di-lego) |
| O | U | colo cultum (coltum) |

vowel weakening (and sometimes strengthening) occurs differently when letters are in certain situations. You can look this up in a grammar (Wheelock's Latin has it in the appendix) or you can learn from experience how these processes work.

Consonant Weakening

| Origin | Mutation | Example |
|--------|----------|-----------------------------------|
| B+S | P+S | urbs (urps) |
| B+T | P+T | obtineo (optineo) |
| G+S | C+S=X | intellego intellexi (intelleg-si) |
| G+T | C+T | pungo punctum (pung-tum) |

both "urbs" and "obtineo", as well as similar words, are pronounced but not spelled with a **P**.

If you want to practice some of what you have learned, I challenge you to explain the perfect tense forms of these words, some of which have and haven't been mentioned previously:

lego, legere, legi, lectum

bibo, bibere, bibi, --

maneo, manere, mansi, mansum (second conj. that follows third declension formations)

ludo, ludere, lusi, lusum

cedo, cedere, cessi, cessum

vivo, vivere, vixi, victum

carpo, carpere, carpsi, carptum (about as close to regular as 3rd conj. gets!)

suspendo, suspendere, suspendi, suspensum

emo, emere, emi, emptum

fugio, fugere, fugi, [fugitum]* (fugitum is not an actual word, but it is an implied form)

Conclusion

So now that you know why so many verbs have these kinds of irregularities, you can go back into the world and shock your friends and family with your newfound knowledge! Everyone is sure to be impressed, and they will probably think you are very cool. Keep in mind that neither this tutorial nor any other source can actually teach you *how* to predict the present tense forms with regularity. However, with this knowledge, it is my hope that you will understand *why* the perfect tenses are as they are.

Amici amicaeque valete!

the end.

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Additional Resources

If you are interested in studying further into the evolution of Latin, I would suggest referring to a good, thick grammar. [I recommend Allen and Greenough's "New Latin Grammar"](#).