

# The STORY'S the Thing . . .

[rev. 7/23/10]

**Well, we ALL love GRAMMAR, right? BUT . . . most of our students are NOT budding philologists.**

Wheelock gives students a VERY heavy dose of grammar and there's ABUNDANT opportunity for instructors to drill that grammar, parse word forms, analyze syntax, etc.: THAT'S what the Practice and Review sentences are designed for and, to a lesser extent, the *Sententiae Ant quae* (though these sentences *very often* offer opportunities for brief, interesting cultural observations as well).

On the other hand, the continuous reading passages following Wheelock's *Sententiae Ant quae* in each Wheelock chapter, and the wide variety of readings in *Scribblers, Scvlptors, and Scribes*, particularly the *nscrpti n s* and *Litter t ra* passages, are the potentially sumptuous "main course" for each chapter. They should not be assigned to our students to read simply as mere grammatical exercises, but rather for the interesting and authentic insights they provide into the ancient world, the Roman mind at work, and Latin literature.

The STORY'S the thing . . . wherein to capture the interest of the students. And these stories, these reading passages, ALWAYS work, IF they are handled in the right way.

Consider this as an ideal, "tripartite" CONTEXT > TEXT > POST-TEXT model for handling continuous narrative passages that have been assigned for reading/translation in class:

## **I. CONTEXT and "PRE-TEXT": INTRODUCTION**

- THE AUTHOR: tell students something about the author, his life, his works, this particular work; some of this can be usefully incorporated into a HANDOUT, complete with Google-searched images (there are lots of ready-made handouts on the WHEELLOCK TEACHER'S GUIDE site: <http://files.harpercollins.com/Wheelock/wheelockslatin.html> )
- THE LITERARY WORK: tell the class something, or ask them what they know, about the work from which the passage is drawn and about the background/context of the passage, i.e., if it's about the Trojan horse, tell them a bit about the *Aeneid* and ask what they might know about the events in Book Two leading up to the action in the passage; again, an illustrated handout could be "worth a thousand words."

Either or both of these activities can be done on the day you actually present the passage or the day before, when you are assigning the passage (a good time to give them that handout).

## **II. TEXT: THE STORY ITSELF**

- now that students have a better idea of the passage's context, read the entire text or at least the opening paragraph aloud, expressively, even dramatically, modeling correct and expressive reading for your students and giving them an opportunity to experience the narrative through their EARS, just as an ancient Roman would have done, and not just through their eyes; OR, if the students have become reasonably good oral readers themselves, have one of them read the passage, or two or three students share in reading portions—the point is to have the class experience the entire passage AURALLY.
- ask a global comprehension question or two, prompting one or more students to

summarize the main points in the passage, or ask a series of more specific comprehension questions (e.g., for the Lucretia readings in Wheelock Ch. 7, Who was Tarquinius Superbus? Who was Sextus? What crime did he commit? Who was Lucretia, and what do we learn about her character in this passage?); this activity serves as a warm-up, refreshing and reassuring students who've prepared the assignment, and giving those who haven't at least a better sense of what the narrative is about.

- call on students individually to read aloud and then to translate a sentence or two, ALWAYS striving for a natural, IDIOMATIC rendering, and following up as appropriate with such questions as “Now what does that MEAN?” or “How would you paraphrase that?—how would you say it in your own words?”
- deal with GRAMMAR issues as you proceed ONLY if essential, i.e., if a student falters in her/his translation, then carefully focus a question or comment or two on the specific grammatical problem area, whether a verb tense, a noun case ending, etc.

### III. **POST-TEXT: FOLLOWING UP**

- when you've completed the translation, either ask a global question or two, to be sure students have fully understood the content, or make some summary point, e.g., ask students, in the case of some philosophical text, what they feel about the author's position (“Based on his comments on the ethics of waging war [Wheelock p. 54], would you label Cicero a hawk, a pacifist, or just what exactly?”), or, in the case of a historical text, tell them (or ask if they already know) what happens next (e.g., after Lucretia's suicide, or after Cicero's speech against Catiline); think of your teaching as a tapestry: make interconnections within each class and especially connections among the readings, e.g., each passage by Cicero should be connected back to ones the class has read earlier and look forward to others upcoming (the selections from his philosophical treatises “On Friendship,” “On Old Age,” and “On Moral Responsibilities,” can and should be viewed collectively)—likewise, connect the series of Catiline readings in Wheelock chs. 11, 14, and 20 and *Scribblers* ch. 17, and, in *Scribblers*, the series of epitaphs and electoral programmata, the several readings dealing with gladiators, and the selections from Martial's *Apophor ta*.
- ask a question or two on style, if there are appropriate points to be made, e.g., “Who can comment on the overall structure of the Sabidius poem [Wheelock p. 40] and the repetitions [a good opportunity to introduce the term “chiasmus”]?”
- you might then finish up by reading the entire passage aloud again, or the last paragraph or so, so that students can experience the text one last time, now that they more fully understand it, through their ears (don't hesitate to ask that they close their books and just LISTEN, attentively, for comprehension).
- ONLY at this point, when you have finished dealing with the text for WHAT it has to SAY, and perhaps for HOW it says it (if you choose to do any stylistic analysis—as sometimes you SHOULD), should you consider any questions/activities related to the nuts and bolts of its grammar, and when you do so, be sure to FOCUS on new and recently introduced grammar, e.g., with the Lucretia passage in Chapter 7, you might ask a series of questions focused on the new grammar, such as, “OK, now that we know something more about Livy's history of Rome and this particular legend drawn from his account of the collapse of the monarchy, let's focus a bit on the new grammar: who can find the first 3<sup>rd</sup>-declension noun in the passage? Who can identify its case and use? Who can find the second 3<sup>rd</sup>-declension noun?” etc.