

Ten Tips for Improving Your Certamen Ability

by Mark Spreitzer

During my time as a Latin student and certamen team captain, I developed strategies, both personal and team-related, which were very helpful in doing well in certamen matches. I wrote these certamen tips during my junior year at Northside, and I believe they continue to be useful for certamen players from novice to advanced.

1. Specialize: Divide and Conquer. This works best when you have a consistent, cohesive team. Talk with one another and determine each team member's strengths. Have the team assign each member to focus on studying a particular topic or topics. Then, each person studies his/her specialty areas extensively. Areas of study to assign can include Mythology, History, Roman Life, Mottoes and Quotes, Literature, Vocabulary, and Grammar. Everyone should know grammar and vocabulary, but choose one or two people to specialize in learning more obscure aspects of it, such as cum clauses, literary devices, defective and deponent verbs, and 4th and 5th declension nouns. History can be divided into categories such as Monarchy, Republic, Early Empire, and Late Empire, and assigned to multiple people.

2. Pass on your knowledge: As you play, you will notice that certain things are frequently asked at the Latin I or Latin II levels. SPQR, the hills of Rome, or masculine 1st declension nouns, just to name a few. You may have learned these things the hard way at your first certamen meet. Use your experience to help the new Latin I students. Make lists of certamen questions that come up often, then pass these lists on to the next year's students. This prepares them to strike at their first meet, benefiting from your experience before they have any of their own.

3. Use buzzing strategy: Take risks. Buzz early and often in a close match. Playing conservatively is rarely a good plan. If you think you know the answer after a few words of the question, buzz in. The ability to anticipate the question and buzz in quickly can make or break you. Know your team well, and anticipate your teammates' moves. Unless you're sure of an answer, give the team 'expert' a few seconds to try first. Don't make a complete guess too soon. If you're fairly certain, however, answer immediately.

4. Use Answering Strategy: How you present your answer is important. If you buzz in early, give a little extra information, as allowed by the rules. Obviously extraneous information is not allowed, but if you hear the question, "The story of Aeneas is told..." answering "Vergil's Aeneid" is acceptable, covering both bases. As long as you are concise and accurate, an extra relevant fact should be okay. If you are unsure of the detail of an answer, give only what you know, and be prepared to give more. If the question is "Who was the maternal grandfather of the Gracchi brothers?" you probably know that it is Scipio. You may be confused as to whether it is Scipio Africanus or Scipio Aemulianus. Answer "Scipio." If prompted to be more specific, guess between the two. But don't always wait to be prompted. If it seems like the Moderator is just waiting for more, give more information on your own. A third bit of advice on answering strategy concerns Latin words and definitions. The usual question goes something like this: "Give the Latin noun and meaning from which 'domestic' is derived." I have seen countless students, including myself, answer "domus," but fail to remember to give the meaning. Even if they did not ask for the meaning, you would not be penalized for giving it if you were correct. So get in the habit. It's better to give the meaning when not required than to forget when it is required.

5. Read multiple books per subject: Read multiple books on each subject that you have been assigned to master, especially if the subject is fairly large. If you've been assigned to know mythology backwards and forwards, reading one book doesn't cut it. Bulfinch is great, especially for starting out. But go on to read Hamilton, Guerber, D'Aullaire, Ovid, Grant, and more. Each author may cover myths that another one doesn't. Also, there are different versions of many myths. You will find that knowing them all can come in quite handy. Especially in Latin II and beyond, winning in mythology will come not from having a basic knowledge of common myths, but from knowing details about lesser known myths that most people won't know. Its those moments when the whole room is staring at you that you know you just answered a really hard question. Good starting books in other areas include Ancient Rome: An Introductory History by Paul Zoch, Amo Amas Amat and More for the mastery of quotes, phrases, and mottoes, and Daily Life in Ancient Rome by Jerome Carcopino.

6. Take notes on strengths and weaknesses and analyze your performance: If possible have your teacher, a parent, or a classmate in the room watching you. Ask them to take notes on the topics of questions that you get and those you get wrong. Don't have them just write down the general topic, like Mythology. The more specific their notes are, the more you can learn from them. If you miss a question on the Muses, they should write that down so you know to go home and study them. These notes let the team members and the team as a whole analyze their performance after a competition. If there is a particular area of grammar that your grammar expert is weak in, these notes will highlight it, and allow the person to study it. If someone is doing better than the assigned 'expert' in a particular area, perhaps you should rethink the team's specialization arrangement.

7. Communicate: If the team is a close knit group, this will go far. Four people are powerful when they can act as one. Talk about the match before hand. Are you nervous? Is there something you don't know? Talk with one another between rounds. Give encouragement to teammates that need it. After a match, celebrate together if you've done well, talk about how to do better in the next match, and support one another if you lose.

8. Believe in yourself, respect your competition: This is pretty basic, but important nonetheless. Don't go into a match expecting to lose. But don't go in expecting to win either. The match will be decided as much by mental attitude as by certamen ability. Don't cut your chances in half before the first question is even asked. Self-deprecation or overconfidence will be your downfall. A positive hopeful attitude which understands that you and your opponents are both worthy competition will go far.

9. Don't get stuck in a rut: In terms of attitude, nothing is more important than never giving up. Even if you're down 100 points, its not too late as long as there is one more round. Have a team huddle, talk about your problem, have the captain give a little pep talk, and get aggressive.

10. Follow the above nine, work hard, and never give up!

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