NCJCL Guide to Writing Certamen Questions

(a work in progress)

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**Preface**

A certamen can only be as good as the questions that are asked, and a bad set of questions can ruin months of hard work by the students, coaches, and organizers of an event. It is also impossible for one person to write the hundreds of toss-ups needed to run a full certamen, much less an entire year’s worth of events. For this reason, every JCL sponsor should know how to write good certamen questions, a skill which helps each sponsor train their own team as much as it contributes to the running of certamen in the state. The more on the same page everyone is about the kinds of questions that may be asked, the better the certamina will be.

**Question Topic Breakdown**

Both at the National level and in North Carolina, there is a set breakdown of how many of which type of question are to be asked in a round.

**Middle School, Novice and Intermediate Levels**

Latin Language Skills – 50%

Classical Mythology – 25%

Roman History and Daily Life – 25%

**Advanced Level**

Latin Language Skills – 40%

Classical Mythology – 20%

Roman History and Daily Life – 20%

Latin Literature – 20%

Not all events have round of 20 questions. In a round of 10 questions, perfect division of the questions in the lower levels is not possible. The above proportions should be approximated in each round and balanced out in the next. For example, if there are 3 mythology and 2 history questions in one round, there should be 2 mythology and 3 history questions in the next. When writing questions contributing to a larger pool of questions, try to spread out the questions you are writing alone these distributions.

**Resources**

How do you know what to ask? The NCJCL Constitution stipulates that the National Latin Exam Syllabus (<http://www.nle.org/syllabi.html>) be a guide to the content of certamen questions. Of course, certamina earlier in the year should ask easier questions, which will get more difficult as the year progresses, culminating with the most difficult questions at State Convention Semi-Finals and Finals.

The National JCL maintains a list of sources and references from which certamen questions may be asked. These questions may prove quite useful not only when writing question, but when training one’s own teams.

<http://www.njcl.org/pages/njcl-certamen-sources>

<http://www.njcl.org/pages/njcl-certamen-references>

There is also a Certamen Preparation Page on the National JCL website, complete with approved vocabulary lists for each level (with links to flashcards of said words), outlines of Roman history, and more. Use it.

<http://www.njcl.org/pages/njcl-certamen-preparation>

**Formatting**

Consistent formatting saves a lot of work for the person who has to compile questions into rounds. Each toss-up should be left-aligned, and prefaced “TU[#]:”. Answers should be on the right, IN ALL CAPS, optionally **bold**, and optionally on the next line, all for the sake of differentiating the answer from the question itself for the moderator. These measures decrease the possibility that a moderator will accidentally read the answer as part of the question.

Bonus questions should also be left-aligned on their own line beneath the toss-up and preface “B1:” and “B2:”, and their answers should formatted just like the toss-up’s answer.

If you are writing or compiling a complete round, make sure to add in centered, bold reminders of score checks after the appropriate toss-ups (5, 9, and 10 for rounds of 10 toss-ups; 5, 9, 15, 19, and 20 in rounds of 20).

Example:

TU7: What one-eyed hero of early Rome held a bridge against an army all by himself?

**HORATIUS**

B1: What nickname, meaning “one-eyed” is usually appended to Horatius’ name?

**COCLES**

B2: Name either the king or the city of which he was king against which Horatius was defending the bridge. **LARS PORSENA/CLUSIUM**

**Questions**

**MYTHOLOGY**

Pertinent Rule: If the toss-up provides a name in Greek, the answer must be the Greek name as well. Likewise for Latin names. This carries through to bonus questions.

Tips:

* Family tree questions are fine, but don’t make *all* your mythology questions about who so-and-so’s father was. Same goes for place names. Asking about actions that people took demonstrates more useful knowledge than just genealogy.
* Avoid early misleadingness/ambiguity. If you ask “Who was Mercury’s father’s mother?”, someone will buzz on “father” and say “Jupiter.” Instead ask, “Who was the mother of the father of Hermes?” This also applies to Roman history questions.

You can ask about mortals, heroes, monsters, (demi)gods, Titans, and more. Among the things you can ask about are:

* relationships between people (e.g. Aeneas and Evander)
* differentiation between people (e.g. Chiron and Charon)
* family trees and places (of course)
* terms for things in myth (e.g. caduceus, thyrsus)
* who did a particular thing (e.g. who killed Medusa)
* a particular thing that happened (e.g. what did Jason famously lose in a river)
* and much more

*Question Archetype #1: The “Who Am I?” Question*

Begin with “Who am I?” Start with fairly obscure but unique information about the answer. Proceed to more obvious information. This is a great type of question for identifying who actually has the most knowledge. It works for Roman history, too. It also is a great teaching tool for details about things students already know.

The key thing with this type of question is to make sure that you leave a couple of details for the bonus questions.

Example:

TU4: Who am I? My father was Aeson, rightful king of Iolcos. I once lost a sandal in a river before I was sent on a quest by my father’s half-brother. During my travels on the Argo I met a woman named Medea, who helped me obtain the Golden Fleece. **JASON**

B1: Who was my father’s half-brother who sent me on the quest to find the Golden Fleece?

**PELIAS**

B2: What happened to the two sons that Medea and I had together? **SHE KILLED THEM**

**ROMAN HISTORY/DAILY LIFE**

Pertinent Rule: Players must specify A.D./B.C. (or C.E./B.C.E.) when giving dates as an answer. If they don't specify, prompt for which one. (Accordingly, questions should specify A.D./B.C. or (C.E./B.C.E.) for dates.)

Pertinent Rule: When the answer is a name, the answer must be unambiguous. In other words, "Cicerō" is a fine answer, but "Scipiō" is not, because there are several top-level-prominence Scipiōnēs (same goes for "Pliny," "Cato," et al.). "Scipiō Africānus" would be a good answer. In the event of an ambiguous answer, prompt the player for elaboration/specificity.

Roman history is fairly straightforward. You can ask about

* any era of Roman history until 476 A.D. (although questions about the Kingdom can also be considered mythology)
* names, dates, geography (cities, provinces, rivers, mountains, bodies of water, roads), battles and wars, among other thing
* relationships/differentiation between people (e.g. Julia and Pompey, what do Vercingetorix and Boudica have in common, Scipio Africanus and Scipio Aemilianus)
* who did a particular thing (e.g. made his horse a senator, conquered Dacia)
* a particular thing that happened (e.g. name of the unsuccessful ways that Nero tried to kill his mother)

Tips:

* As with mythology, try to include actions that people took in the questions rather than simply asking about family trees or simple dates.
* As with mythology, phrase your questions carefully to avoid early ambiguity.
* As with mythology, you can use the "Who am I?" archetype of question for Roman history.

This category also includes so-called "**Daily Life**," which is basically a catch-all category for Roman culture. The proportions of this category that are history and daily life vary from round to round, but it should never be *only* daily life and no history. Daily life includes (among other topics):

* Roman villa (rooms, etc.)
* baths (rooms, tools, etc.)
* terms surrounding Roman institutions (e.g. patronage, religion, government)
* meals
* clothing
* military terms
* festivals
* entertainment (e.g. gladiators, races in the circus, theater)

**LATIN LITERATURE**

These questions only occur in Advanced. It is traditional to ask about:

* basic author info (names, birth/death places/dates)--as with history and myth, try to limit these sorts of questions.
* author's lives (families, employments, places lived, military/government service; this can sometimes overlap with Roman history, but as long as it involves an Roman author or poet, it can go under this category)
* titles of various works (e.g. Vergil's poem about farming?)
* genres (satire, novels, histories, epic, elegy, didactic, etc.)
* content of various works (e.g. who wrote poems to Nemesis? what comprises Ovid's Heroides?)
* poetic meters (e.g. in what meter is Aeneid written)
* famous quotes from literature (e.g. who wrote *carpe diem*)

**LATIN LANGUAGE**

This is the most important category of questions, and it includes the greatest variety of types of questions. Every round of certamen should have its language questions spread out amongst the following categories, which of course overlap. Feel free to mix these language subcategories in the toss-up and bonus parts of each question.

* vocabulary
* derivatives
* **grammar** (all parts of speech, constructions, forms, etc.)
* comprehension
* composition
* mottoes/abbreviations (some of these will fall under Roman history/daily life)

Pertinent Rule: If a question is asked in Latin, it must be answered in Latin, unless otherwise specified. Likewise for English.

Pertinent Rule: If a question asks about vocabulary and the word in question is a verb, a player may answer with *either the first or second principle part* (or all principle parts) of the verb. If the answer calls for a definition, *the translations of the first or second principle parts are to be considered correct*.

Tip: Be careful about writing questions the correctness of the answers for which depends solely on macra. That puts an extra burden on players and moderators, and is a potential source of misunderstandings, challenges, and discord. It’s fine to write such questions, but write them in a way where the means of disambiguation is clear. Moderators are allowed to prompt players to spell out words that they feel may have been mispronounced, but the burden is on the players to know that they need to specify long or short vowels—a moderator should never ask “is that ‘a’ long or short?” For this reason, make sure your own students have good pronunciation!

Let’s take a look at some types of questions you can ask.

*Question Archetype #2: The pure definition*

This is a basic vocabulary question. The canonical way of phrasing it is “*Quid Anglicē* *significat ?”*  It must be answered in English. Try not to use conjugated verbs, which test understanding of grammar, and should therefore be asked with a different type of question.

Example:

TU8: Quid Anglicē significat hortus? **GARDEN**

B1: Quid Anglicē significat arbor? **TREE**

B2: Give an English derivative from each of these words.

**HORTICULTURE, ARBOR(ETUM)/ARBOREAL, ETC.**

*Question Archetype #3: Differentiated meanings*

Another common vocabulary question, this should be phrase “Differentiate in meaning between[/amongst] and [and ].” The bonus questions can be more “differentiate” questions, or they can be related language questions.

Example:

TU2: Differentiate in meaning between “mēns” and “mēnsa.”

**MĒNS=MIND, MĒNSA=TABLE**

B1: What is the name of the International High IQ Society that derives from one of these words? **MENSA**

B2: From which of these words does MENSA derive? **MĒNSA (TABLE)**

*Question Archetype#4: Synonyms and Antonyms*

Example:

TU1: Give a synonym in Latin for the word *pelagus*. **MARE/AEQUOR/PONTUS/ALTUM**

B1: Using the word *pelagus*, how would you say in Latin “the cold sea”? **PELAGUS FRĪGIDUM**

B2: Give an antonym in Latin for the word *frīgidus*.

**CALIDUS/CALDUS/IGNEUS/FLAGRANS**

*Question Archetype #5: The basic derivative question*

Simply asks for the derivation of a particular English word. Should be phrased: “From what Latin [part of speech], with what meaning, do we derive the English word ?” It is very important to include the part of speech, since there are many related nouns, verbs, adjective, etc. in Latin, and whether a word derives from one part of speech or another is an issue that can be avoided by specifying which one you’re looking for in the question.

Example:

TU3: From what Latin **verb**, with what meaning, do we derive the English word somnambulist? **AMBULŌ/AMBULĀRE, [I/TO] WALK**

B1: From what Latin **noun**, with what meaning, do we derive the same word?

**SOMNUM, SLEEP**

B2: What does the word “somnambulist” mean? **A SLEEPWALKER**

*Question Archetype #6: Name that derivative*

The answers to these questions are English derivatives. You describe the meaning of the derivative and from what Latin word it derives, and they have to name the English word.

Example (from 2009 Nationals Novice Round 1):

TU2: What English word meaning "stout" or "portly" is derived from the Latin word meaning "body"? **CORPULENT**

B1: What English word meaning "narrow-minded" is derived from the Latin word meaning "province"? **PROVINCIAL**

B2: What English word, synonymous with "reverence," is derived from a third declension Latin word meaning "man"? **HOMAGE**

You'll note that this example does not actually ask for the Latin words from which they derive; that knowledge is almost necessary for getting the question right, so you don't need to ask for it. For an easier overall question, though, you could ask for it on the first bonus and the second bonus could be , for example, to name another derivative from that Latin word.

*Question Archetype #7: Which of the following…*

Start with “Which of the following (Latin words/nouns/verbs/etc.)”. They’re supposed to pick out the word from the list that is unlike the others, whether it is of a different gender, tense, case, derivation, etc. This can be used to test vocabulary, derivatives, and all kinds of grammar.

Example:

TU5: Which of the following English words does not derive from the same Latin word as the others? *permission, admit, misery, emissary, committee* **MISERY**

B1: From what Latin word, with what meaning, does misery derive?

**MISERUS/A/UM, SAD**

B2: From what Latin verb, with what meaning, do the other 4 words in the list derive?

**MITTŌ/MITTERE, (I/TO) SEND**

*Question Archetype #8: Commonality*

A close relative of the “which of the following” question, you begin this question with “What do the following Latin [part of speech]s have in common? You can include some specifc hints in the question. Answers could be that they all are semideponents, have irregular imperatives, are first declension masculine nouns, are defective verbs, etc.

Example:

TU1: What do the perfect tense forms of the following Latin verbs have in common? *Discō, currō, cadō, tangō, dō*

**THEY REPEAT THE FIRST CONSONANT OF THE WORD/REDUPLICATE**

B1: What is the linguistic term for this repetition? **REDUPLICATION**

B2: Give the first and third principle parts of another verb that reduplicates in the perfect.

(THEY CAN USE **STŌ, STETI / TENDŌ, TETENDĪ /MORDEŌ, MOMORDĪ / TONDEŌ, TOTONDĪ / PENDŌ, PEPENDĪ / CANŌ, CECINĪ / PUNGŌ, PEPUGĪ / PARIŌ, PEPERĪ / PARCŌ, PEPERCĪ** OR ANY OTHER VERB THAT REDUPLICATES IN THE PERFECT)

*Question Archetype #9: The passage question*

Passage questions go as follows: “Listen carefully to the following passage, which I will read twice. Then answer the question that follows **in [Latin/English]**.” (It’s very important to specify what language the answer should be in.) Then a passage follows, and then “The Question:” and then the toss-up question, which should be in Latin, regardless of whether the answer is supposed to be in Latin or English. Try not to make the passage too long. Also, note that the question should always start with a question word like *quis, ubi, cūr*, etc. Good certamen players will buzz after that first word.

Example (from 2009 Nationals Novice Round 1):

TU7: Listen to the following passage, which I will read twice. Then answer the question that follows **in Latin**.

**Cerēs in terrīs ambulat. Quod Proserpinam fīliam vidēre nōn potest, Cerēs Proserpinam quaerit. Proserpina tamen ā deō Plutōne sub terrā tenētur. Animus deae Cereris valdē dolet.**

The Question: **Ubī tenētur Proserpina? SUB TERRĀ / TERRĪS / IN TARTARŌ**

B1: **Quem vidēre nōn potest Cerēs? PROSERPINAM / FĪLIAM (SUAM)**

B2: **Vērum aut falsum: fīliā raptā, animus Cereris miserrimus erat? VĒRUM**

Grammar Questions:

There are many, many ways to ask grammar questions. Included here are some ideas. You can ask students to

* parse **one or more** variables of a declined/conjugated word (e.g. give the person, #, tense, voice, and mood of appropinquābāminī)
* alter one or more variables of a declined/conjugated word (e.g. change *appropinquābāminī* to the active voice; make *canis* accusative; make *altum* comparative; make *bōnārum* masculine, make *fiat* indicative---these are good bonus questions)
* fill in the blank (e.g. use the verb *esuriō* to complete the sentence: sī cibum consumerem, ego nōn nunc [answer: **esurīrem**])
* complete an analogy (e.g. curritis : currimus :: ambulās : [answer: **ambulō**])
* translate a sentence English🡪Latin or Latin🡪English. (You may want to specify a construction, e.g. “using a passive periphrastic, say in Latin ‘we must flee.’”)

**Conclusion**

In this Guide, I have tried to lay out some of the basics of writing certamen questions. There is so much more out there, and there are so many more types of questions than I have been able to list here (this Guide is a work in progress). The best way to familiarize yourself with the conventions of certamen questions, short of lots of experience moderating, is to **read a bunch of questions yourself**. There is a wide availability of questions on the internet, including many years of rounds from **Virginia, Texas, and Florida, as well as the rounds from past National Conventions (just search "certamen questions, and these are among the first few results).** I highly recommend these if you are looking for inspiration into question *formats*. These extremely competitive states, while the difficulty of their questions may not be appropriate for certamina in most states, do maintain a high standard of question format and integrity, and should be used as models. I hope this Guide has helped. ***bona fortuna* and happy writing!**