Cursus Scriptorum
Overall Game Plan

Cursus Scriptorum is a game that uses the sequence of the Roman *cursus honorum*, the sequence of stages or offices in the political hierarchy, to measure and encourage progress through the stages of becoming an accurate and effective writer. Its stages mark specific levels of achievement and skill mastery.

Game Procedure

The game divides the basics of the discipline into two very broad headings, corresponding with things that are seen as either particular facts about words on the one hand, and those that can be generalized into rules or patterns on the other. Into the former category fall issues associated with spelling and usage of particular words. Into the latter fall all others.

Scores

The “rule-based” material is divided into five broad areas, with twenty-six subdivisions. (This is a simplification of the earlier version of the game, which had more than eighty.) The five top-level scores are used to measure advancement; they are computed as a product (multiplicative) of the relevant subscores. Hence the mastery of the whole of a subject area is not possible without controlling all of the parts to at least an adequate level, since a zero (or a near-zero score) will effectively negate the effect of the others. Subscores are all decimal values from zero to two; all students start off with a value of one in each of these subscores. From there, successful performance will raise the subscores, and poor performance or errors will lower them. Ideally, the student will continue to improve, while attending to areas that are causing local and temporary setbacks.

There are a few other scores that come into play, and allow us to reward work and to signify various issues in the other areas of the game. Among these, the most immediately prominent is the monetary unit, the *denarius*. Every student has a balance of denarii. This is increased with every assignment, which has its own denarius reward associated with it. Denarii may be awarded for other reasons as well, and they may be taken away for issues arising in the next section.
Word Lists

The “particular” material — spelling and usage — is handled somewhat differently. Each time a student makes an error in spelling or usage, the relevant word is added to his or her spelling list or usage list. There is no penalty for the first appearance of a word on the list, but the student thereby is notified that there will be a penalty if it comes up again. If a word that is already on the student’s spelling list is misspelled again, a fine of one denarius will be assessed. If it happens again, a fine of two denarii will be assessed. If it happens yet again, a fine of four denarii will be assessed — and so on, doubling each time. Such numbers will mount up rather quickly: the point is to encourage students to attend to these problems diligently, and to fix them permanently, once they have been pointed out to them. With usage, which has more nuances and difficulties, the fines will merely increase by two each time. We still hope that this will provide adequate motivation. If it does not, we may revise this plan.

Ranks

As the student continues to improve in the various areas, he or she is automatically raised in level from one rank to the next. Should the scores drop significantly thereafter, demotion is also a possibility, but we would rather not have that happen, so a certain lenience will be built in, to encourage students to keep pushing forward. The ranks of the game are:

- Discipulus (rank beginner: most students start as Civis)
- Civis (citizen)
- Miles (soldier)
- Tribunus [militum] (military tribune)
- Praefectus (prefect)
- Quaestor (quaestor)
- Aedilis (aedile)
- Praetor (praetor)
- Consul (consul)
- Propraetor (propraetor)
- Proconsul (proconsul)
- Censor (censor)

Of these, the office of consul was the normal apex of the political and social pyramid. The offices above that on the cursus honorum were exceptional offices, not always in play. It’s fairly unlikely that any student will reach those levels, and we haven’t yet had to specify very concrete standards for them. But they remain available if needed.
Pedagogical Content

The game divides the basics of the discipline into five broad areas, with twenty-six subordinate areas. (This is a simplification of the earlier version of the game, which had over eighty.)

Mechanics

Mechanics is one of the less important features of good writing: it’s largely conventional, and has to do less with the ideas being presented or even with the use of language than with presenting them in an accessible and commonly understandable way. At the same time, those conventions of presentation make it easier for everyone to understand what you’re trying to say: they facilitate everything else. So they are among the earliest elements introduced. The mechanics area comprises four sub-scores. They are (with the level in which it comes into play):

• Punctuation (Discipulus)
• Capitalization (Discipulus)
• Underlining, italics, etc. (Discipulus)
• Page and submission format (Civis)

The mechanics score is achieved by multiplying the subscores together. Since most students start at the Civis level, lapses in mechanics are subject to penalty from the outset of the game for them.

Grammar

Grammar is a vast and complex set of issues, and can be broken down into a large number of subordinate areas. Nevertheless, for practical matters of writing, it has seemed convenient for us to concentrate on five areas that encompass most of the mistakes that students make. They are as follows. All of them come into play at the first (Discipulus) stage of the game, and hence they are subject to penalties from the Civis level up:

• Agreement (subject-verb, etc.)
• Pronouns (reference, case, antecedent, agreement, etc.)
• Verb use (tense, mood, etc.)
• Modifiers (agreement, placement, avoidance of dangling, etc.)
• Sentence structure (a catchall instance covering a variety of lapses)
Substance
Conveying substance is, ultimately, what writing is for, and hence it’s probably the most important of these categories. Development of careful argumentation and meaningful expression is the core purpose of this course. The scoring areas for substance come onto the table somewhat more gradually, because they are harder to pin down with a simple set of rules, and because it seems pedagogically useful for the student to concentrate on at most one or two of them at a time. There are five subscores included here. Marked with the level at which they come into play, they are:

- Correctness (getting the facts right) (Miles)
- Completeness (covering the whole subject) (Tribunus)
- Relevance (covering only the subject, and not random other stuff) (Tribunus)
- Balance (considering the subject from all sides) (Praefectus)

Infrastructure
By infrastructure we are referring to the many subordinate processes that are part of good academic writing, but which aren’t necessarily obvious on the surface of the written product itself. Under this rubric fall all those things having to do with structure, argumentative support, background research, and argument structure (and the fallacies of argument). These are introduced progressively from the Cives to the Quaestor level:

- Paragraph structure (topic sentences and topical breakdown) (Civis)
- Argument structure (rational sequence of ideas, fallacies) (Miles)
- Essay structure (larger-scale topical breakdown) (Miles)
- Large structure (organization of paper-length matters) (Tribunus)
- Parallelism (using parallel structures to reinforce ideas) (Praefectus)
- Support (bringing in adequate evidence and argument) (Quaestor)
- Research (creating materials for support) (Aedilis)

Style
Style is an almost infinitely varied field, and the reduction to five sub-areas is merely a matter of convenience. Nevertheless, it can be addressed, we think, under the following headings:

- Persuasiveness (on the boundary of style and substance) (Praefectus)
- Tone (establishing the right level and relationship with reader) (Quaestor)
- Elegance/simplicity (streamlining one’s prose) (Aedilis)
• Euphony (involving the sound of what one writes) (Quaestor)
• Diction (finding the perfect word and phrase) (Praetor)