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Research Article

Why is classics important?

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Abstract

This manifesto was originally submitted into and went on to win the senior category in the 2025 Classical Association 'Write | Speak | Design' competition. Through a mix of research and my personal classics journey, it argues that the contemporary relevance and remote accessibility of classical subjects, along with the academic joy they encourage in learners, make the study of the ancient past as important as ever and highlights ways these areas could be harnessed to increase the importance of classics further.

Keywords: chronic illness; education; classics; ancient history; distance learning

Recent years have seen public enthusiasm for the ancient world soar, with Greek mythology retellings flying off shelves, classically inspired memes sweeping the internet, and what will be the second film adaption of Homer's *The Odyssey* in 2 years currently in production (Cremona 2025). Meanwhile, 2023 saw a significant increase in the number of students enrolling for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and advanced level (A-level) courses in classical civilisation and ancient history (Holmes-Henderson 2023). However, in view of the recent government decision to terminate its Latin Excellence Programme (Murkett 2024), the value of classical subjects seems to be in doubt. Some may argue that the often brutal world the ancients inhabited is distant from our own, that it has lost its relevance with the advent of digital technology and social media, or that memorising ancient verb endings has no practical value. But, over the course of this essay, I will not only illustrate that the ancient past is a fun subject that touches our lives in numerous ways and highlight the role of remote formats in making it as accessible as ever but also suggest ways these avenues can be harnessed to increase its importance further.

Before I begin it is important to note that, while this essay reflects that my engagement with it has been predominantly centred on the Mediterranean, the ancient world was a deeply diverse and interconnected one, and I have only touched the surface of what it has to offer.

Knowing ourselves

One of my favourite aspects of studying the ancient past is the variety of ways it infiltrates our lives. The surviving literature, history, and philosophy of the Greco-Roman world alone spans hundreds of years of human knowledge and experience, articulating themes and concerns that still resonate. I recently learnt that certain passages in *The Iliad* speak to 21st-century concerns about the destruction of our natural landscape (Hall 2022). In this way, studying the ancients invites us to reflect on our own actions and experiences, acting as a personal and cultural touchpoint throughout our lives. This can be seen in novels and initiatives that use classical texts as vessels to explore aspects of contemporary life, such as Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* and Aquila Theatre's *Warrior Chorus* programme. Additionally, the ancient Greek and Roman world has shaped and, to an extent, been shaped by European historical tradition, which means we can spot its echoes in almost every aspect of everyday life. Growing up in York, I often encountered remnants of Roman occupation, such as the city walls, which I had enormous fun exploring with my grandad. I recently re-read *The Hunger Games* and was staggered by the extent Collins had drawn on the Roman world in her construction of Panem. There are thousands of words, phrases, even typing symbols I use every day which have their origins in Latin – among them 'manifesto' (from *manifestus* [obvious] and *manifesto* [make public]). In addition, modern history has seen the ancient past harnessed to support a vast spectrum of ideologies and political rhetoric (Mac Sweeney et al. 2019). So, studying ancient civilisations and their reception also gives us a deeper understanding of our journey to this point in time and where we are heading.

If I was to design a school curriculum, I would want it to reflect this contemporary relevance, for example, by covering a variety of voices that have emerged from the ancient world and exploring how writers and artists have conversed with it in their works. To take inspiration from the #SadHistory social media trend (British Museum 2025), I would encourage learners to empathise with the individuals behind material remains, for example, through art or creative writing workshops, to foster a deeper connection with source material. I also think it would be interesting to explore the wider ancient world and the interactions that took place within it to gain a well-rounded understanding of how different traditions developed and influenced one another (Boange 2024). To go further, the integration of the Greco-Roman world into so many aspects of Western tradition means that it often complements

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other subjects – my Latin knowledge became an unexpected revision tool for scientific vocabulary back when I studied biology – presenting opportunities to incorporate elements of a classical education across the curriculum (Pucknell 2025). An example of this in action is *Vocabulous*, a course which aims to enrich students' vocabulary by teaching Latin and Greek word root patterns in primary English lessons (Huelin 2025). These connections can also be built outside the classroom, for example, through resources which package classical content within different formats, such as Jasmine Elmer's *Legit Classics* podcast.

Remote accessibility

I live alongside numerous debilitating chronic health issues which confine my engagement with the ancient world (and all other aspects of my life) to the four walls of my bedroom, so another reason classics holds importance in my life is the variety of resources such as this which allow me to study and engage with it remotely. A number of institutions such as The Open University and Oxford Department for Continuing Education offer virtual courses in classical subjects, with Classics for All's *Chorus* programme and the Lytham St Annes Classical Association's ambassador scheme among the enrichment opportunities available to remote students. The ancient world has inspired a flourishing of books that allow me to immerse myself in ancient settings, and advances in virtual reality and 3-dimensional (3D) scanning technology make it possible to explore sites and artefacts with a click. Meanwhile the rising popularity of remote and hybrid models, accelerated by social distancing measures during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, have allowed me to attend numerous events on the classics calendar. Another important aspect, and almost a reason in itself to study classics, is the community surrounding it – one which, luckily for me and other remote learners, has a large online presence, with video conferencing and social media platforms offering a space for ancient history enthusiasts with a variety of interests and approaches to discuss the ancient world. While no book or virtual museum tour will fully replicate the experience of engaging with ancient places and objects in person, for many, these formats are the only accessible option. So, a subject which lends itself so wonderfully to remote study opens up our worlds and expands the possibilities for what we can achieve.

Where possible, organisations and educational institutions should continue to factor remote accessibility into their events, courses, and exam provision so those unable to attend do not miss out on the opportunities available to those who can, and these bodies do not miss out on promising candidates who cannot access in-person settings. It is also important to ensure that navigating remote formats is a positive experience, for example, by including subtitles and audio descriptions for individuals who are deaf and visually impaired or recording events so attendees can watch at their own pace. In a recent Oxford Learning College poll, the most common aspects students disliked about distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was having less in-person support and social interaction (2022). This is a reality for remote learners all the time. So, it is important we have access to resources that complement our studies, for example, the Classics Podcast's ancient history A-level series. I also think it would be beneficial to introduce a digital platform where remote students can connect with each other or pose any questions they have about course materials to tutors in a secure and monitored environment. As highlighted by the rapid shift to distance learning during the pandemic, it is also important to support remote learners who do not have access to the internet (EdTech Advisory Forum 2020, 3), for example, through a bursary scheme to help with costs or a library service where students can borrow textbooks. Furthermore, the growing popularity of social media as a platform for disseminating and consuming information (Russell 2024, 15) means that, by harnessing these spaces, the wonders of the ancient world can be shared with wider audiences, attracting fresh perspectives in both remote and in-person contexts and further increasing its importance in our own.

Classics is fun

Finally, the enjoyability of classics to its learners makes it valuable in itself. Many arguments defending the importance of classical subjects (which I have often used) pivot on justifying their usefulness, emphasising the range of practical skills and career opportunities on offer to those who study them. The Open University, for example, lists research, communication, and analytical thinking among the skills a degree in classics develops, while career paths open to classics graduates include law, journalism, teaching, and the heritage sector (2025). However, there are numerous reasons I value classics in my life which are not related to a practical application – the flutter of satisfaction when I decode a passage of Latin, the smile I cannot hold back discussing godly antics in *The Iliad*, and the ache to know more about an individual behind a 2000-year-old inscription – and while it is important to consider where our studies can lead, we should also acknowledge the value of a subject that inspires and excites us irrespective of its usefulness. Navigating my classics degree alongside chronic symptoms would be even more difficult if I did not love this subject as much as I do. The fun and exciting nature of classics was a popular theme among learners in a recent Classics for All film, with teachers noting that student enthusiasm boosted engagement and confidence (2023). Moreover, in a society increasingly focused on performance in high-stakes exams, with school status, teacher accountability, and student progression tied to results (Stannard 2017), any subject that fosters a love of learning and teaching should be encouraged.

I believe this enjoyment factor should play a significant role in shaping classics education, for example, through ongoing efforts to train a new generation of inspiring teachers (Classics for All 2021) and create resources which package the ancient world in fun and novel ways. It is also important to ensure that lessons and course materials accommodate a variety of learning styles, as well as consult directly with students to shape an environment where everyone can thrive. A brilliant example of this is the Open University's Relaxed Tutorial Project, which removed certain social and sensory pressures, such as being put on the spot and speaking aloud, to make studying and engaging with the ancient world a more comfortable and enjoyable experience for participants with neurodiversity, social anxiety, and chronic illness (Fraser 2025). Building on this, up until I started my degree, my post-16 education was largely self-directed, and while the lack of tangible support came with challenges, part of what made my initial wanderings into classics so exciting was having space to explore aspects of the ancient world and its reception that were most intriguing to me. So, I would also suggest the incorporation of flexible lessons that allow students to explore their interests and develop their own unique dialogue with the ancient world – a concept which, according to Eleanor Dickey, is not so different to ancient pedagogical practice, in which pupils completed 'individually suited' (2025) tasks at their own pace.

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The importance of classics

Classics was a door that I walked passed hundreds of times without realising anything lay behind it. I only discovered classics when I started teaching myself Latin during my A-levels, and it would take many more words to do justice to the myriad of ways it has enriched my life since. But, as I hope this essay has shown, the world waiting beyond that door continues to hold value, whether you are studying a classical subject at school, teaching it to others, wandering around an exhibition, smiling at a viral meme, writing a story set in the ancient past or even a manifesto about why classics is important. We are still in conversation with the ancient world, as well as the classics lovers who came before us, and as long as people continue to find points of connection with it, for the same reasons as me or because of something unique to them, and it remains accessible to those who do, that dialogue will be important.

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