

What's With The "O" in Delicto?

Article By:

Keith Paul Bishop

Students beginning the study of law almost immediately confront a congeries of Latin phrases, many of which end in the vowel "o". For example, students will see *in pari delicto* (in equal fault) and *ex delicto* (from a wrong). But they will also run into *locus delicti* (scene of the crime) and *corpus delicti* (body of the crime). This change of endings may seem both mysterious and arbitrary, but it actually follows well-established rules of Latin grammar.

The reason for the different endings is that most Latin nouns and adjectives have different endings depending upon how the word is used grammatically. These are called case endings and they refer to the nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, and in some cases, locative and vocative cases. In Latin, these case endings follow a very consistent pattern depending upon the declension of the particular word. Fortunately, there are only five declensions and thus it isn't too difficult to memorize these patterns.

In the case of *in pari delicto* and *ex delicto*, the Latin word for crime or fault, *delictum*, is used in a prepositional phrase (*in* meaning in, and *ex* meaning from). These prepositions require the ablative case, which in the case of a second declension, neuter nouns such as *delictum* means changing the *um* to *o*. In the case of *locus delicti* and *corpus delicti*, the word *delictum* is a possessive and hence the case ending is *i*. The table below lists the different endings of *delictum*:

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	<i>Delictum</i>	<i>Delicta</i>
Genitive	<i>Delicti</i>	<i>Delictorum</i>
Dative	<i>Delicto</i>	<i>Delictis</i>
Accusative	<i>Delictum</i>	<i>Delicta</i>
Ablative	<i>Delicto</i>	<i>Delictis</i>

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