

Sequence of Tenses

Latin has rules regarding what tense of the subjunctive to use in a subordinate clause. These rules are called the “sequence of tenses.”

Primary tenses are tenses that refer to either NOW or AFTER NOW (i.e. present, future, and future perfect).

Secondary tenses are tenses that refer to BEFORE NOW (i.e. imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect).

A primary tense main verb (present, future, or future perfect) will be followed by either a present subjunctive (to indicate the action happens at the same time or after the main verb) or a perfect subjunctive (to indicate the action happened before the main verb).

A secondary tense main verb (imperfect, perfect, or pluperfect) will be followed by either an imperfect subjunctive (to indicate the action happened at the same time or after the main verb) or a pluperfect subjunctive (to indicate the action happened before the main verb).

Sequence of Tenses Chart

	Main Clause (indicative)	Subordinate Clause (subjunctive)
Primary Sequence	Present Future Future Perfect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present (same time or after main verb)• Perfect (before main verb)
Secondary Sequence	Imperfect Perfect Pluperfect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imperfect (same time or after main verb)• Pluperfect (before main verb)

Examples:

Marcus rogat quid senatores faciant. (primary main verb + present subjunctive)
Marcus asks what the senators are doing.

Marcus rogat quid senatores fecerint. (primary main verb + perfect subjunctive)
Marcus asks what the senators did / have done.

Marcus rogāvit quid senātōrēs facerent. (secondary main verb + imperfect subjunctive)
Marcus asked what the senators were doing.

Marcus rogāvit quid senātōrēs fēcissent. (secondary main verb + pluperfect subjunctive)
Marcus asked what the senators had done.