

READING CHALLENGE

The Secret Life of a Roman Teenager

What was it like to be 14 years old in Ancient Rome? School, food, baths, and gladiators

Level	A2 (Elementary)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	True Stories
Duration	~15 minutes
Skill	Reading

Close your eyes and imagine this: you wake up in a small bedroom. The walls are painted red and yellow. There is no glass in the window — just a wooden cover. You can hear people shouting in the street, horses walking on stone roads, and a man selling bread. You are not in a modern city. You are in Rome, and the year is AD 100. You are a teenager in the most powerful city in the **ancient** world. What would your life be like? Let us follow a day in the life of a Roman teenager named Marcus, who is 14 years old and lives in the centre of Rome with his family.

Waking Up

Marcus wakes up very early, just before sunrise. Romans started their day when the sun came up because they did not have electric lights. His bedroom is small and simple. He sleeps on a wooden bed with a mattress filled with wool. His family is quite wealthy — his father is a **merchant** who sells olive oil and wine. They live in a domus, a private house with rooms around a central courtyard. Poorer families lived in tall apartment buildings called insulae, which were often crowded and noisy. Marcus gets dressed quickly. He puts on a tunic — a simple shirt that goes down to his knees. Over this, he sometimes wears a **toga**, but togas are heavy and difficult to put on. Most Romans only wore togas for special occasions. Marcus puts on leather sandals and goes to the kitchen, where a **slave** has prepared breakfast. Breakfast is simple: bread, cheese, olives, and sometimes honey. Romans did not eat big breakfasts.

Going to School

After breakfast, Marcus walks to school. Roman boys usually started school at age 7. Girls from wealthy families sometimes had private tutors at home, but most girls did not go to school at all. Marcus goes to a small school near the forum — the main square of the city. His teacher is called a grammaticus. The classroom is very basic: just some benches and a chair for the teacher. There are no books like we have today. Instead, students write on wooden tablets covered with a layer of wax. They use a pointed stick called a stylus to scratch letters into the wax. If they make a mistake, they can smooth the wax flat and start again. Marcus studies reading, writing, arithmetic, Greek language, and public speaking. **Discipline** is very strict. Teachers sometimes hit students who make mistakes or do not pay attention. Marcus does not enjoy this part of school.

Food and Meals

Romans usually ate three meals a day. Breakfast was small. Lunch, called prandium, was also light — maybe some bread, cold meat, fruit, and vegetables. But dinner was the big meal. It was called cena, and in wealthy families it could last for hours. Marcus and his family eat their cena in a special dining room called a triclinium. Instead of sitting on chairs, Romans lay on long couches around a low table. They ate with their fingers — forks did not exist yet. A typical dinner might include fish, roasted meat, vegetables, eggs, and bread. Rich families had much more: roasted peacock, snails, stuffed dormice, and even flamingo tongues. Romans loved a sauce called garum, which was made from fermented fish. It sounds strange, but they put it on almost everything — like ketchup today. For dessert, they ate fruit, nuts, and honey cakes. At special dinners and **feasts**, there might also be musicians, dancers, and

poets to **entertain** the guests.

The Roman Baths

After school, Marcus often goes to the public baths. The baths were not just for washing — they were the social centre of Roman life. Imagine a combination of a swimming pool, a gym, a library, and a cafe, all in one building. Everyone went to the baths: rich and poor, young and old. A visit to the baths usually followed a routine. First, you exercised in the yard — wrestling, lifting weights, or playing ball games. Then you went into the tepidarium, a warm room. After that, the caldarium, which was very hot, like a sauna. Finally, the frigidarium — a cold pool. Romans did not have soap. Instead, they rubbed olive oil on their skin and then scraped it off with a curved metal tool called a strigil. The floors of the baths were often covered with beautiful **mosaics** — pictures made from thousands of tiny coloured stones. The baths were heated by a system called a hypocaust: slaves kept fires burning under the floor, and the hot air warmed the rooms above. It was one of the most clever inventions of the ancient world.

Gladiators and the Colosseum

The most exciting event for a Roman teenager was going to the games at the Colosseum. The Colosseum was a giant arena in the centre of Rome that could hold about 50,000 people. Entry was free — the **emperor** paid for the games to keep the people happy. The most famous part of the games was the gladiator fights. Gladiators were trained fighters — some were slaves, some were prisoners of war, and some were volunteers who wanted fame and **fortune**. They fought with different **weapons**: swords, nets, tridents, and shields. Some gladiators fought each other. Others fought wild animals — lions, bears, and even elephants. Not all fights ended in death. Many gladiators survived and became very famous, like sports stars today. The crowd would cheer for their favourite fighters. There were also **chariot** races at a different arena called the Circus Maximus. Up to 250,000 people could watch the races there. Teams wore different colours — Red, Blue, Green, and White — and fans supported their team with great passion, just like football fans today.

Religion and Temples

Religion was an important part of daily life in Rome. Romans believed in many gods and goddesses. Jupiter was the king of the gods. Mars was the god of war. Venus was the goddess of love. Mercury was the god of trade and travel. Marcus and his family visit a **temple** regularly to pray and make offerings. They leave food, wine, or small statues at the altar. Before important events — like a business trip or an exam — the family might visit a temple to ask for good luck. Every Roman home also had a small shrine called a lararium, where the family prayed to their household gods every day. Romans also celebrated many religious festivals throughout the year. Saturnalia, held in December, was the biggest festival. It was a week of feasting, gift-giving, and fun. Schools closed, slaves were given time off, and people wore colourful clothes instead of their usual white togas. It was a bit like Christmas and New Year combined.

Growing Up Roman

Roman teenagers grew up fast. When a boy turned 14 to 16, he had a special **ceremony** called the coming-of-age. He took off his childhood toga (called the toga praetexta, which had a purple border) and put on the plain white toga virilis — the toga of a man. This meant he was now a **citizen** and an adult. He could vote, own property, and join the army. After this ceremony, many young men continued studying with a rhetor — a teacher of public speaking and law. Others joined the Roman army, which was one of the most powerful armies in the world. Soldiers served for 25 years. It was a hard life, but at the end they received land and money. Girls had a very different experience. Most Roman girls were married between the ages of 12 and 14. They left their family home and went to live with their husband. Wealthy girls learned to read and write, manage a household, and play music. But they could not vote, hold public office, or be soldiers.

What We Can Learn

Life in Ancient Rome was very different from life today in many ways. There was no electricity, no internet, no cars, and no fast food. Slavery was a normal part of society, and life could be short and hard. But in other ways, Roman teenagers were not so different from teenagers today. They went to school, they complained about strict teachers, they loved watching exciting sports, they hung out with friends at the baths, and they worried about growing up. The Romans built roads, bridges, and buildings that still stand after 2,000 years. They created laws that modern countries still follow. They invented concrete, central heating, and public toilets. When you walk through a modern city with its roads, courts, and public baths, you are walking through ideas that started in Rome. Marcus would probably be amazed by our phones and computers. But if he visited a modern school, ate lunch with friends, and went to watch a football match, he might think: "This is not so different from my life in Rome."

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
toga	a long piece of cloth that Roman men wore wrapped around their body
slave	a person who is owned by another person and forced to work without pay
emperor	the ruler of an empire; the most powerful person in Ancient Rome
temple	a building where people go to pray to their gods
feast	a very large and special meal, usually for a celebration
chariot	a small vehicle with two wheels, pulled by horses, used in races
merchant	a person who buys and sells goods for a living
citizen	a person who belongs to a city or country and has legal rights there
weapons	objects used for fighting, such as swords, spears, or shields
discipline	strict rules and training; the practice of obeying rules
fortune	a very large amount of money; great wealth
ceremony	a formal event with special actions and words, often for a religious or public occasion
ancient	very, very old; from thousands of years ago
entertain	to do something that makes people enjoy themselves
mosaic	a picture or pattern made from small pieces of coloured stone or glass

Comprehension Quiz

1. At what age did Roman boys usually start school?

- A) 5
- B) 7
- C) 10
- D) 12

2. What did Romans use instead of paper for writing at school?

- A) Animal skin
- B) Wooden tablets covered with wax
- C) Stone tablets
- D) Dried leaves

3. What was the Colosseum used for?

- A) Shopping and trading
- B) Teaching and education
- C) Gladiator fights and public entertainment
- D) Religious ceremonies only

4. What happened to Roman boys when they turned 14 to 16?

- A) They had to join the army immediately
- B) They received the toga virilis in a ceremony and became adults
- C) They were sent to live in another city
- D) They started working as gladiators

5. What was garum?

- A) A type of Roman clothing
- B) A Roman board game
- C) A sauce made from fermented fish
- D) A weapon used by gladiators

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	B	At what age did Roman boys usually start school?
2	B	What did Romans use instead of paper for writing at school?
3	C	What was the Colosseum used for?
4	B	What happened to Roman boys when they turned 14 to 16?
5	C	What was garum?