

An Introduction to Latin Verse

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Introduction

There are a number of things you need to become more familiar with if you want to recreate the sound of Latin and in particular of Latin verse:

- the sounds of individual letters and letter combinations [see the separate document also available online: *The Pronunciation of Classical Latin*]
- the principle of quantity, i.e. long and short vowels, and long and short syllables
- how words were stressed
- the regular metres and rhythmic patterns of poetry
- and the meaning of the Latin words you are reading

Long and short syllables

The building stones of classical verse are the words and in particular their syllables: some syllables are ‘long’ others are ‘short’. You need to distinguish between long and short syllables and long and short vowels.¹ There is a connection between the two: if the syllable has a long vowel the syllable must also be long.

The length of a vowel or a syllable is called its ‘quantity’. Some scholars refer to long and short syllables as ‘heavy’ or ‘light’ syllables to distinguish them from long and short vowels.²

A syllable is long if

- the vowel is long (unless the vowel is lost in an elision—see ‘Elision’ below);
- it contains two vowels run together as a diphthong (**audire**, **deinde**, but not **deus**, which is two syllables);
- it contains a short vowel followed immediately by two consonants, even if one or both consonants are part of the following word; but note:
 - where a short vowel is followed by two consonants of which the second is **l** or **r**, the syllable may be long or short (e.g. **patris**).
 - where a double **l** or **r** follows a vowel, however, the syllable is always long (**currus**, **flagellum**)
 - an **h** has no consonantal value (and **ch**, **ph**, **rh** and **th** are treated as single consonants)
 - **qu** does not ‘make position’, i.e. act as two consonants
 - an **x** has the value of two consonants and therefore does make position.

¹ for more on long and short vowels, and pronunciation in general, see *The Pronunciation of Classical Latin* available alongside this document

² ‘Heavy’ and ‘light’ syllables have not gained widespread recognition, perhaps because of the suggestion of weight or emphasis, which quantity should not imply. A solution might be to call long vowels ‘strong’ vowels and short vowels ‘weak’ ones, and leave syllables in line with their musicality as long or short. But that would only add to the possible confusion: just keep in mind that both a syllable and a vowel may be long or short.

Exercise

Show the long syllables by adding a line above them, e.g. **omnibus, p̄r̄imus**

arma virumque canō

ōrātiōnem audīvimus

exeunt omnēs

Camilla linquēbat habēnās

silva sp̄nōsa

puer ēgregius est Caesar

Stress

In addition to having a long or short quantity, a syllable may or may not be stressed. The rule is similar to the pattern of stress in English. Stress the second last syllable if it is a long syllable, but if the second last syllable is short, then stress the third last syllable:

amābit	<i>s/he will love</i>
relinquit	<i>s/he abandons</i>
dominus	<i>master, lord</i>
militēs	<i>soldiers</i>

Words of only two syllables should have the first syllable stressed, even if it is short, but lightly (**ĕrat**).

Some polysyllabic words have two stresses (again as in English: *information*):

amāvērunt *they have loved*

The pluperfect of the same verb (**amāverant** = *they had loved*) is subtly different. On the page the difference lies in one vowel. But because of the change in quantity, the stress moves back a syllable to create a perceptibly different sound to the ear:³

In this line from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [8.187], the verb is used twice, first in the present subjunctive (*he may possess*) then in the indicative (*he does possess*)

omnia possideat, nōn possidet āēra Mīnos

The stressing and therefore the sounds of **possideat** and **possidet** are quite different.

The changes in number of syllables and quantity clearly affected the stressing, and I suspect will have created some subtle variations in sound which were important to the meaning of the spoken language; whereas the value of inflexion (word-endings), which point the meaning on the page, tended to diminish in the spoken language.

³ We have something similar in English, e.g. *economy* and *economical*, *history* and *historical*.

Exercise

Say aloud these words:

puella	intereā	asperitās frīgorum abest
monēre	mulier	carpe diem
mittere	mulieris	cucullus
in aquā	quaesierīs	cuculus

Return to the previous exercise (**arma virumque canō**, etc), and underline the syllables which should be stressed

Scholars have not always agreed over the presence of stress in Latin. There do remain grey areas over how heavily or lightly words should be stressed, over individual words, and how the stress altered with inflexional change. Nonetheless the most telling argument in favour of a stress system similar to our own is the rule of coincidence of stress (weight of breath) and ictus (first long syllable of a foot) in the final two feet of a hexameter⁴. With so few exceptions it happens too much for the coincidence to be an accident.

The Hexameter

The hexameter is so called because the line is divided into six ‘feet’ not unlike musical bars (*hex* is Greek for six). The scheme below represents the hexameter (— for a long syllable, ∪ a for short one):

— ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — || ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — ∪

The line does not contain a fixed number of syllables, for there are variables: two short syllables for a second long syllable in any of the first four feet. There are, however, certain fixtures (e.g. the first syllable of each foot and the entire fifth foot; and short syllables always come in pairs, except for the final syllable of the line).

There are two ways to learn the rhythms of classical Latin verse. One, listen to someone read it, copy and commit a few lines to memory; then see how well you manage with some unprepared lines: repeat until you can feel the rhythm almost at sight. The other is to study how the verse is put together, syllable by syllable, line by line. At some point you will need to try both.

When you are ‘scanning’ a line, i.e. breaking down the line into six feet, with long and short syllables, start with the final two feet (five syllables), which are fixed.

This metre is used by almost all the poets. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* and Juvenal’s *Satires* are all in hexameters.⁵

⁴ See below: ‘Stress and quantity in classical Latin verse’

⁵ The hexameter is also the first line of the elegiac couplet (see below).

The Caesura

The mark || represents a caesura, or a ‘cutting’ between two words. This often (but not always) coincides with a pause in the sense. Nine out of ten caesuras come after the first (long) syllable of the third foot. Occasionally it will appear in the fourth or second foot, or both, or even rarer, after the first short syllable (i.e. second syllable) of a foot.

Two things to say about it for now. Firstly, the caesura will help you scan a line. If nine times out of ten a word ends after the first syllable of the third foot then that is a clue to what is going on around it. Its position between words will help you, no pun intended, to find your feet.

Secondly it is worth noting what the caesura actually does: the role of the caesura is to avoid a division between words falling between the second and third feet, which would generate a plodding and monotonous rhythm. The caesura ensures that the words straddle the beat, particularly at this point in the line where it is gathering momentum.

omnia possideat, nōn possidet āēra Mīnos.

Minos may possess all things, but he does not possess the air

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.187

— u u | — u u | — || — | — u u | — u u | — u
om ni a possi de at, nōn possidet ā ē ra Mīnos.

Elision

If a word ends with a vowel or **m** and the next begins with a vowel or **h**, the last syllable of the first word is elided, forming a single syllable. The sound of the first syllable should not be entirely lost but largely swallowed as it is merged with the sound of the second:

ī, sequere Ītaliā ventīs, pete rēgna per undās.

go, make for Italy with (the help of) the winds, seek the lands over the waves.

Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.381

— u u | — u u | — || — | — u u | — u u | — —
ī, se quer (e) Ī ta li am ven tīs, pe te rēgna per undās.

The letters **u** and **i** (**gemitū**, **patrī**) are subject to elision, unless they are used as consonants (**uincere**, **iam**).

A final 'm'

In classical poetry a final **m** is treated like a vowel. **Septem**, for instance, would lose the final syllable before a vowel (and indeed has lost it altogether in all the evolved Romance words for 'seven': **sept**, **sete**, etc.). The final **m** in medieval poetry, however, was not elided. This appears to be a more complete sound, no doubt consolidated by pupils who were called upon to enunciate the difference between **mēnsa** and the accusative **mēnsam**.

quid tantum īnsānō iuvat indulgēre dolōrī?
Why does it please you to yield so much to your mad grief?

Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.776

— — | — — | — || ∪ ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — —
 quid tant (um) īn sā nō iu vat in dul gē re do lō rī ?

Stress and quantity in classical Latin verse

Each syllable is either long or short. This is nothing to do with the force of breath (i.e. stress), loudness, tone or pitch, but simply the length of time it takes to utter the syllable. While English verse relies solely on stress to propel the rhythm, classical Latin poetry is founded on a rhythm of quantities (similar to quavers and crotchets in music) where the long syllable is twice as long to utter as a short one. The natural word stresses come into play too creating a counterpoint that is the distinctive feature of classical rhythms. The metres, including the hexameter, were almost all Greek in origin; the stress was native Italian. Latin was a 'heavier' language than Greek, an impression created by the greater number of long syllables. The stress, if only light, relieves and invigorates the otherwise more ponderous language.

In the first four feet stresses occur on either long or short syllables. The final two feet of a hexameter have a fixed pattern: there is almost always a stress on the first (long) syllable of the fifth foot and the first (long) syllable of the sixth. This lends a resolution to the line which gathers a rhythm of its own as you read several lines.

The stressed syllables are underlined:

vītaque cum gemitū fugit indīgnāta sub umbrās
and the life spirit with a groan disappears offended to the shades below

Virgil, *Aeneid* 12.952

— ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — || ∪ ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — —
 vīta que cum gēmi tū fugit in dī gnā ta sub umb rās

Exercise

Mark the quantities, feet, caesura and stresses to these lines:

omnia possideat, nōn possidet āera Mīnos.

quid tantum īnsānō iuvat indulgēre dolōrī?
 ī, sequere Ītaliā ventīs, pete rēgna per undās.

Elegiac couplets

A Latin or Greek ‘elegy’ is so called because of its metre, the elegiac couplet. The couplets are pairs of lines, the first of which is the hexameter, the second is called the ‘pentameter’ (one foot less: *pente* is Greek for five). The pentameter is a shorter nimbler line, which usually brings the sentence or unit of sense neatly to a close.

— u | — u | — || u | — u | — u | — u
 — u | — u | — || — u | — u | —

These are used in the love poetry of Ovid, Propertius and Tibullus, and in the epigrams of Catullus and Martial.

arma gravī numerō violentaque bella parābam
 ēdere, māteriā conveniente modīs.

I was preparing to tell of arms and violent wars in a serious rhythm, with subject matching the metre.

Ovid, *Amores* 1.1.1-2

— u | u | — u | u | — || u u | — u u | — u | u | — u
 ar ma gra vī nu me rō vi o lentaque bell a pa rā bam
 — u u | — u u | — || — u u | — u | u | —
 ē de re, mā te ri ā con ven i en te mo dīs.

Hendecasyllabics

Catullus and Martial were both fond of this metre. Each line has eleven syllables (*hendeca* is Greek for eleven):

u u — u u — u — u — u

cēnābis bene, mī Fabulle, apud mē
you will dine well, Fabullus, at my place

Catullus, *Poems* 13.1

— — — u u — u — u — —
 cē nā bis be ne, mī Fa bull (e), ap ud mē

Was classical Latin poetry spoken or sung?

No one really knows. An ancient recording would be a wonderful thing, but even so it might not distinguish between speaking and singing, to our ears at least: the quantitative rhythms are themselves musical, already halfway between speech and song. The ancient Greek bard was described as a 'singer', and the subclassical Hellenistic poets speak of the 'song' and 'lyre'. However, these were not to be taken literally, at least not in the case of the later Hellenistic scholar-poets, for whom 'song' had become a conventional term.

Most Romans experienced poetry by hearing it. It was performed by skilled actors or readers, who used their voices, faces and bodies to bring the verses alive. This idea of performance cannot be overemphasized, and it is safe to assume that music in some form was never far away.

Before and after the classical period

Both before and after the classical period, the signs are that Latin verse was driven by a rhythm of stress only. In the fifth and sixth centuries AD, the rhythm of long and short syllables all but disappears. The schools gave fewer hours to teaching classical metres, and the more popular rhythms of early church music influenced the poetry. A rhythm of stress and end-rhyme emerges, much as we have in English. During the millennium AD 500-1500 Latin was the second language of Europe, and with some give-and-take nestled alongside vernacular languages, most of which gathered their poetic rhythms from an accent of stress which in turn influenced their pronunciation of Latin verse.⁶

⁶ French is an exception. Many French readers of classical Latin poetry ignore the stress, in line with their own poetry, which tends to be more 'syllabic', i.e. they produce a much smoother, more even weighting of all the syllables. Our stress-based accentuation of Latin was thought by some French scholars to be a plodding Germanic disruption of their ancestral tongue. They even formed a society to protect their pronunciation of Latin – 'La Société des amis de la prononciation française du Latin'.

Appendix 1: Some characteristic quantities

Short final -ă

nominative singular of the 1st declension: **puellă**
all neuter plurals: **vīnă, carmină, temporă**

Long final -ā

ablative singular of the 1st declension: **puellā**

Infinitives of the 2nd conjugation (long ē) and 3rd conjugation (short ě):

monēre *to advise, to warn* [2nd conjugation]
mittēre *to send* [3rd conjugation]

Note also the ‘poetic’ 3rd person perfect plural: **amavēre** for **amāvērunt**,
posuēre for **posuērunt**, etc; useful if the poet wanted to avoid the final
syllable making position (**-unt**) and so keep it short

With some verbs, a short vowel in the present tense lengthens in the perfect:

fūgit <i>s/he escapes</i>	fūgit <i>s/he (has) escaped</i>
iūvat <i>s/he helps</i>	iūvit <i>s/he (has) helped</i>
lāvat <i>s/he washes</i>	lāvit <i>s/he (has) washed</i>
vēnit <i>s/he comes</i>	vēnit <i>s/he came (has come)</i>
vīdet <i>s/he sees</i>	vīdit <i>s/he saw (has seen)</i>

Long final -ēs

All 3rd declension plurals: **patrēs**
All 5th declension nouns, singular and plural: **fidēs, diēs**
2nd person singular of verbs, indicative or subjunctive: **monēs, amēs**

Only a few exceptions with **-ēs**, e.g. some (not all) 3rd declension nouns in
the nominative singular: **hospēs, equēs, milēs**; and **ēs** (*you are*)

Long final -īs

All dative and ablative plurals: **puellīs, bonīs, nōbīs**
2nd person of 4th conjugation in the present tense: **audīs**
Occasional 3rd declension ending in place of **-es** in the accusative plural:
artīs, nāvīs, ignīs, dēmentīs, fulgentīs
vīs, whether noun (*force, violence*) or verb (*you wish*)

Short final -is

2nd person of 3rd and 5th conjugations in the present tense: **mittīs, capiīs**
3rd declension nominative and genitive singular: **cīvīs, omnīs, Cicerōnīs**

Long final -ās

1st declension accusative plural: **puellās, bonās**
2nd person singular of verbs, indicative or subjunctive: **amās, capiās,**
mittēbās, audiverās

See the Appendix 2 for a more detailed list of final long and short final syllables.

Appendix 2: Quantities of final syllables

Certain final syllables are consistently long or short. The quantities apply to all words that belong to the declensions or conjugations of the examples given:

ending	LONG (i.e. with a macron)	SHORT (with no macron)
-a	abl.sing., 1 st decl.: <u>silvā</u> imperative: <u>festinā!</u>	nom.sing., 1 st decl.: <u>silva</u> all neuter nom. and acc. plurals: <u>vīna</u> , <u>tempora</u> , <u>corpora</u> , <u>nōmina</u>
-e	abl.sing., 5 th decl.: <u>rē</u> , <u>diē</u> , <u>fidē</u> a few adverbs: <u>dignē</u> all superlative adverbs: <u>optimē</u> imperative: <u>sedē!</u>	voc.sing., 2 nd decl.: <u>ō amīce</u> abl.sing., 3 rd decl. <u>patre</u> most adverbs: <u>facile</u> , <u>bene</u> , <u>male</u>
-i	gen.sing./nom.pl., 2 nd decl.: <u>annī</u> voc.sing., 2 nd decl. <u>ō Claudī</u> dat. sing. 3 rd decl.: <u>patrī</u> 1 st person perfect: <u>amāvī</u>	<u>nisi</u> , <u>mihi</u> , <u>tibi</u> , <u>sibi</u> , <u>ibi</u> , <u>ubi</u> (the final <u>i</u> of all these may be long or short)
-o	dat./abl.sing., 2 nd decl. <u>annō</u> , <u>vīnō</u> <u>amō</u> , <u>moneō</u> , <u>mittō</u> , <u>audiō</u> , <u>capiō</u>	<u>ego</u> , <u>homō</u> , <u>modō</u> (<i>occas.</i> <u>modō</u>) 1st person <u>-ō</u> shortens to <u>-o</u> by the time of Juvenal i.e. <u>amō</u> , etc.
-u	abl.sing., 4 th decl.: <u>manū</u> , <u>gemitū</u>	
-as	acc. pl. 1 st decl.: <u>silvās</u> all 2nd persons: <u>amās</u> , <u>amābās</u>	
-es	nom.pl./acc. pl., 3 rd decl.: <u>patrēs</u> most 2nd persons: <u>monēs</u> , <u>regēs</u>	2 nd person of <u>sum</u> , <u>esse</u> : <u>es</u>
-is	all dat.pl. & abl.pl.: <u>silvīs</u> , <u>vinīs</u> 3 rd decl. acc.pl. (<i>occas.</i>): <u>omnīs</u> 2 nd person, 4 th conjug.: <u>audīs</u> 2 nd person, perf. subj.: <u>fuērīs</u> 2 nd person of <u>volō</u> , <u>velle</u> : <u>vīs</u>	<u>patrīs</u> (gen.sing., 3 rd decl.) <u>omnīs</u> (nom./gen.) 3 rd & 5 th conjugations <u>mittīs</u> , <u>capīs</u> 2 nd pers. fut perf.: <u>fuērīs</u>
-os	acc.pl., 2 nd decl.: <u>annōs</u>	
-us	gen.sing. & nom.pl. & acc.pl. of 4 th declension nouns: <u>gemitūs</u>	nom. sing., 2 nd decl.: <u>annus</u> nom.sing., 4 th decl.: <u>gemitus</u> nom.sing./acc.sing., 3 rd decl.: <u>tempus</u>