

Latin letters

The Latin alphabet

The English alphabet is based upon the Latin alphabet with one or two additions. The Romans had no **j** but used **i** for the consonant ('j') or vowel ('i'). Likewise there was no **u** in Latin, in which **v** served as either consonant ('v') or vowel ('u'). Romans wrote everything in upper case.

Some of these conventions have changed. Now we always write **u** for 'u' and in some texts (not this one) **u** represents a 'v' as well (e.g. **seruus** for **seruus**). Names keep their initial capital letters, as in English, but otherwise the lower case is generally used, even for the first letter of a sentence. In medieval Latin, **j** was introduced in place of **i** for the consonantal 'i', e.g. **hic jacet** (*here lies*); in most modern texts this has now reverted to **i** (**hic iacet**).

Y appears in a few names and imported Greek words, almost always as a vowel; **k** and **z** are occasional; and there is no 'w' in Latin: its sound was represented by **v**.

A guide to letter sounds

There are six vowels, **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u**, and **y**, which is always a vowel in Latin. Each of these vowels has a long and a short version. Here long vowels show macrons (**ā**, **ē**, **ī**, **ō**, **ū**, **ȳ**). Macrons appear in learning guides and coursebooks, but not in standard texts of Latin literature. A macron does not signal any stress or extra force for the syllable—although it may coincide. (See the notes on **Stress accent** also available online).

- a** short 'a' sound, between the 'u' in *cup* and the 'a' in *cap*; as in *ǎ-ha!*
- ā** long as in *fāther*
- ae** somewhere between *pīne* and *pāin*; the latter was the sound in spoken Latin, certainly after the classical period and probably before it¹; scholars cannot entirely agree over the classical sound

¹ 'classical' – This broadly includes the first centuries BC and AD, spilling into the first few decades of the 2nd century AD (i.e. from Cicero to Juvenal); the traditional definition is much narrower (Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, and Livy at a pinch).

au	as in <i>house</i> ; in speech tendency towards Latin \bar{o}
b	as in English (bs and bt are pronounced ‘ps’ and ‘pt’)
c	as in <i>cat</i> (not <i>chair</i> or <i>ceiling</i>)
ch	like English ‘k’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
d	as in English
e	(short) as in <i>met</i>
\bar{e}	(long) as in <i>may</i>
ei	usually two syllables, e.g. de-ī (<i>gods</i>); in a few words a diphthong (single syllable) similar to <i>rein</i> as in deinde (<i>next</i>); the i is a consonant in some words (eius)
eu	usually two syllables, e.g. deus ; in a few words a diphthong (single syllable), with two sounds run together ‘e-oo’, as in heu (<i>alas</i>)
f	as in English, always soft
g	similar to a hard English ‘g’ (never as in <i>George</i>); in certain words less closure ... a fading sound in magister , fugit , ego
gn	at the beginning of a word as ‘n’ (the silent g is similar to English ‘k’ in <i>knee</i>); gn in the middle of a word is between <i>hangnail</i> and <i>Bolognese</i>
h	as in English, although there was a tendency to ignore an initial h in speech
i	a short vowel, as in <i>dip</i>
\bar{i}	a long vowel, as in <i>deep</i>
i	the consonantal i (sometimes written as a ‘j’) is like English ‘y’. In some words the vowel and consonant would have been vocalised similarly: e.g. etiam , where the consonantal i from iam came to be treated as a vowel. Such a distinction is barely detectable, but mattered in verse with its formal numbering of syllables
l	as in English
m	as in English at the beginning or in the middle of words; a final ‘m’ is a fading sound which should be pronounced with the lips open, as a nasalisation of the preceding vowel
n	as in English, except below
nf	a preceding vowel is always long (īnferō); the n is nasalised and less solid than an English ‘n’
ng	as in <i>anger</i> (not <i>hangar</i>)
ns	a preceding vowel is always long (īnsula); the n is nasalised and less solid than an English ‘n’ (closer to <i>instigate</i> than in <i>inspect</i>)
o	as in <i>not</i>
\bar{o}	as in <i>note</i> as pronounced by Scots or Welsh, or French <i>beau</i> or German <i>Boot</i>
oe	as in <i>boil</i> or as a Scotsman might say the name <i>Roy</i>

- p** as in English but with quicker completion and less ‘h’
- ph** as in ‘p’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
- qu** as in *quack* (not *quarter*)
- r** always trilled with the tip of the tongue
- s** as in *gas* (never voiced as in *has*)
- t** as in English but with quicker completion and less ‘h’
- th** as in ‘t’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
- u** as in *pull*
- ū** as in *pool*
- ui** usually two syllables (e.g. **graduī, fuī**); in a few words a diphthong, like French *oui*, (e.g. **huic, cui**)
- v** in 1st century BC a ‘w’ sound (Caesar, Catullus, Cicero, Horace, Virgil, etc.), but a ‘v’ sound is traceable in some quarters, possibly as early as Ovid (end of 1st century BC), becoming more widespread thereafter; note that v is sometimes written as a **u** (**seruus**)
- x** as in English *axe*, not *exact* (‘ks’, not ‘gs’)
- y** short vowel as in French *tu* (becomes closer to ‘i’ towards the end of the classical period)
- ȳ** long vowel as in French *sur*
- z** similar to English ‘z’

With double-letters extend the sound of the doubled-up consonant

currus, reddere, posse, committere, supplicium

Note: speakers of Romance languages (French, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian or Spanish) are halfway there already, especially with vowel sounds; but there are differences with the parent language, e.g. classical Latin has no soft ‘c’ or ‘g’.

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Next: **Word stress in classical Latin**
(available online at the LATIN QUARTER)