

Latin Meter and Prosody

Latin poetry is distinguished from prose by its use of meter. While meter in modern English poetry is largely based on syllabic stress, ancient Latin poetry was based on **vowel quantity** or, in other words, sequences of long and short syllables.

Consider Shakespeare's 18th sonnet, which is in the expected iambic trimeter:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd
 And every fair from fair some time declines,
 By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
 Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Note the alternating patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. This sonnet also exhibits another common trait of English poetry: end rhyme. Rhyming schemes were generally avoided in Classical Latin poetry, though sound effects of other sorts are very common. The jingling effect of rhyming patterns are best exhibited by the most infamous line of Latin poetry composed by everyone's favorite windbag, Cicero:

O Fortunatam, natam, me consule, Romam!

Native Italic poetry, and consequently earlier Latin poetry, may have also used a meter—called **Saturnians**—that was based on stressed accent like ours, but the reality is Saturnians are almost impossible to explain. The first Latin epics were composed in this meter. Here is the opening of Livius Andronicus' *Odissia*:

Virum mihi, Camena, insece versutum

Quantitative Meter: While stress plays some role in Classical Latin (and Greek) meter, the focus of the prosody was **quantitative**, so it depended on the quantity, or length, of the vowels in each syllable. By "length" here we mean the amount of time that it takes to utter the syllable. Generally, each vowel (or diphthong) in a Latin word encompasses its own syllable. These syllables can be long or short, based on the period of time that is required to pronounce the syllable. Here are the quick rules on the lengths of various vowel combinations:

- 1) A syllable is **long by nature** if it contains a long vowel (such as the abl. sing. of the 1st declension-ā) or diphthong. Naturally long vowels are marked with macrons in Pharr.
- 2) A syllable is **long by position** if its vowel is **closed** by being followed by two or more separate consonants, a double consonant (**x** or **z**), or by the consonantal **j**. Quick note of some exceptions: **h** never closes a syllable, **qu** counts as one consonant, and the liquid consonants **l** and **r** sometimes close a syllable and sometimes do not.
- 3) **All other syllables are short.**

Practice: For the opening line of the *Aeneid*, determine whether each syllable is **long by nature**, **long by position**, or **short**. Mark each syllable accordingly with a “—” for a long, and a “v” for a short syllable.

Arma virumque canō, Trojae quī prīmus ab ōrīs

Elision: When a word ends with a vowel, diphthong, or the consonant *m*, and the next word begins with a vowel or the aspirate *h*, those two syllables will regularly **elide** (or combine) into one. This is not just part of Latin poetry, but actually the natural pronunciation of the language and would have been evident in colloquial and rhetorical Latin as well as demonstrated when someone read Latin prose texts aloud (as was the norm). When a Latin speaker (usually non-native) attempted to speak or read without demonstrating the effects of elision, they were called “**subrusticus**,” which means “worse than a country hick.” When the syllables combine in **elision**, the first syllable is (usually) dropped and it glides into the second. We mark this by slashing through the initial syllable and writing a glide (“_”) under and between the two elided syllables.

Practice: Examine the following lines for elision and mark any elided syllables as described above:

lītora – multum ille et terrīs jactātus et altō

necdum etiam causae īrārū saevīque dolōrēs

Quick note: monosyllabic forms of *sum* (usually *es* or *est*), when elided with a previous word, will usually feature **prodelision**, the process through which the first syllable is instead retained and covers the second syllable.

Dactylic Hexameter

Sometime after the introduction of Greek culture into Rome, Latin authors began to experiment with the incorporation of Greek metrical schemes into Latin poetry. From Homer onward, the meter for narrative epic had customarily been **dactylic hexameter**. After some attempts to incorporate this epic meter into Latin poetry were met with success (mostly at the hands of Ennius), the native Italic Saturnians largely fell into disuse and dactylic hexameter became the norm for epic poetry. Ennius’ *Annales*, Catullus’ epyllion (poem 64), Vergil’s poetry, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and the later epics of Statius and Silius Italicus, among others all used this meter.

The name “dactylic hexameter” means that the standard line is composed of **six feet** (*hex* = six; *metra* = measures) of **dactyls** (*dactylos* = finger). The dactyl is the basic unit of this meter and it looks like this: — v v, where the “—” corresponds to a long syllable and the “v” corresponds to a short syllable. Note: the meter takes its name from the Greek word for “finger” because fingers consist of three bones, the first being long and the second and third shorter in comparison. As the name implies, then, the etymologically perfect line of **dactylic hexameter** would be composed of six dactyls, like this, with a vertical line to designate the breaks between each foot:

— v v | — v v | — v v | — v v | — v v | — v v

However, there are two things to note: First, a **spondee**, a foot composed of two long syllables (— —), **can take the place of any dactyl** (though this substitution is usually avoided in the fifth foot!); this

is largely due to the fact that a long syllable takes roughly twice as long to pronounce as a short syllable. Second, **the final foot of every line of hexameter will be treated as a spondee**, even if its final syllable naturally short. We mark this final syllable with an “x,” because it can be either long or short. This mark (and the syllable it designates) is called the **anceps**.

So, more formally, we can show the ideal line of hexameter to be as follows:

— u u | — u u | — u u | — u u | — u u | — x

But, in reality, the substitution of spondees for some of these dactyls yields lines more like this:

— u u | — — | — u u | — u u | — u u | — x

— — | — — | — u u | — — | — u u | — x

— u u | — u u | — — | — — | — u u | — x

Practice: “Scan” the first line of the *Aeneid* again, this time noting the foot breaks:

Arma virumque canō, Trojae quī prīmus ab ōrīs

Caesurae: A word end within a foot is a very slight break called a **caesura**. Normally, however, we ignore the many **caesurae** which appear, except when the break occurs in coincidence with a natural break (in syntax or sense) or pause within the line. This is then called the “**principal caesura**” or, for our purposes “**the caesura**.” The regular positions for these principal caesurae are: 1) after the first (long) syllable of the third foot, 2) after the first (long) syllable of the fourth foot, and 3) rarely after the first (long) syllable of the second foot. Not every line will have a noticeable principal caesura, but there is usually some small break in the line. We mark the principal caesura with a “//” (double slash) placed between the syllables where the caesura occurs. **Practice:** Add the principal caesura to the first line of the *Aeneid* above.

TIPS and TRICKS for Latin Scansion:

- **Proceed in this order:** 1) mark all elisions, 2) mark all naturally or positionally long syllables, 3) mark the short syllables (i.e., the rest), 4) assign the foot breaks, 5) place the caesura [if needed]
- Anytime you encounter *one* short syllable in a line of dactylic hexameter, there **has to be another short syllable either before or after it**.
- If you hit a bump or are unsure, **try working your way from the back of the line** (which happens to be the part of the line least prone to substitutions) back toward the front.
- When all else fails, **count up the total number of syllables** in the line. The number should be between 12 and 17. This can indicate the number of dactyls and spondees in the line.
- Be sure to check the notes in Pharr! These will alert you to some of the other nuances / unusual bits of Latin prosody that we did not cover today; things like: **correption, synizesis, hiatus, and semi-hiatus**.

Terms to Know:

anceps	long by nature	scansion
caesura	long by position	spondee
dactyl	prodelision	vowel quantity
dactylic hexameter	quantitative vs. stress-based	
elision	Saturnians	

Practice Exercise: Combine all of your newly acquired knowledge to scan the first eleven lines of the *Aeneid*. Be sure to mark the quantity of all syllables, the foot breaks, any instances of elision, and the principal caesurae.

Arma virumque canō, Trojae quī prīmus ab ōrīs

Ītaliā fātō profugus Lāvīnaque vēnit

lītora – multum ille et terrīs jactātus et altō

vī superum saevae memorem Jūnōnis ob īram

multa quoque et bellō passus, dum conderet urbem 5

īnferretque deōs Latiō; genus unde Latīnum

Albānīque patrēs atque altae moenia Rōmae.

Mūsa, mihī causās memorā, quō nūmine laesō

quidve dolēns rēgīna deum tot volvere cāsūs

īnsignem pietāte virum, tot adīre labōrēs 10

impulerit. Tantaene animīs caelestibus īrae?