

A QUICK AND DIRTY INTRODUCTION TO LATIN PROSODY

Latin verse is quantitative and modeled on Greek verse; that is, poetic rhythm is governed by a sequence of long and short syllables and **not** by natural word accent (as in, for instance, English iambic pentameter: ‘In fáith I dó not lóve thee wíth mine éyes’). The quantity of each syllable is determined by the quantity of its vowel. Because the Roman alphabet does not differentiate between long and short vowels, the vowel quantity must be determined (or learned) for every syllable. While any open syllable can be long or short by nature—e.g., *sēcūris* (axe, hatchet), *sēcūris* (untroubled, secure)—the basic rules governing the quantity of vowels by position are as follows:

1. All diphthongs are long.
2. Closed syllables, i.e., syllables that end with a consonant, are metrically long. Hence the general rule: if a vowel is followed by *two consonants*, the syllable will be long. There are a few exceptions:
 - a. *x* and *z* both count as **two** consonants;
 - b. *qu* equals a **single** consonant;
 - c. an initial *h* is **not** considered a consonant;
 - d. Within a single word, a mute followed by a liquid or nasal (e.g., *cr*) does not **necessarily** lengthen a preceding vowel.
3. *Elision* occurs when a word ending in a vowel precedes a word beginning in a vowel. Elision metrically suppresses the final vowel of the preceding word, e.g., *māgn(a) aūla*.
 - a. A syllable ending in *m* also **elides** with a following vowel, e.g., *mōnstr(um) hōrrēndum*

METERS TO KNOW

1. **Dactylic Hexameter:** six dactyls (long-short-short) in which two shorts can always be replaced by one long (yielding a spondee) save the last two feet, which will always scan ‘strāwbĕrrŷ shōrtcāke’.

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ārmā uīrūmqŭē cānō, Trōiaē quī prīmŭs āb ōrīs
 itālīām fātō prōfŭgŭs Lāvīniāquē uēnīt
 litōrā mŭlt(um) ill(e) ēt tērrīs iāctātŭs ēt āltō
 uī sŭpērŭm, saēuaē mēmōrēm Iūnōnīs ōb irām

2. **Elegiac Couplet:** The first line of an elegiac couplet is a straightforward dactylic hexameter. The second line, sometimes (incorrectly) deemed a dactylic pentameter, consists of two halves, each consisting of two and one-half dactyls (long-short-short long-short-short long). Spondees can occur in the first half but not in the second. The couplet is nearly always a grammatical unit, with little to no carry-over (enjambment) to the following couplet. The end of the couplet will always scan ‘blŭebĕrrŷ piē’.

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Militāt ōmnīs āmāns, ēt hābēt sŭā cāstrā Cŭpīdō
 Atticē, crēdē mīhī, militāt ōmnīs āmāns.