

HOW TO READ LATIN VERSE : DACTYLIC HEXAMETER

The Tradition of the Dactylic Hexameter. Dactylic Hexameter is the meter used for Latin epic poetry, including Vergil's *Aeneid*. The most crucial distinction between Latin and English metrics is that, unlike English meters, which are based on a sequence of stress and unstressed syllables, Latin meters consist of a sequence of long (*longum*) and short (*breve*) syllables. A long syllable takes twice as long to pronounce as a short one. The patterns of long and short syllables create the rhythm of the poetry.

Fingers (and toes). The word **dactylos** is Greek for "finger" (and for "toe" as well). The **dactyl** is therefore a snippet of rhythm that recalls a finger, with a rhythmic shape consisting of one long syllable (noted as —), which represents the long bone, or phalanx, of the finger, plus two short syllables (υ υ), which represent the two short phalanges.

Feet. The **dactyl** serves as the basic rhythmic unit, **metron** or **foot**, of hexameter verse. The word **hexameter** also derives from Greek and essentially means "six metrons in a row." In other words, a single epic verse consists of six successive dactyls: — υυ / — υυ / — υυ / — υυ / — υυ / — X

Hexameter (6 feet) Metron/Foot: 1 2 3 4 5 6

Observe that the final metron is technically not a dactyl. Its second syllable is called the **anceps** (Latin for "two-headed"), which is noted by an **X**, signifying either a short or long syllable. In fact, for purposes of recitation, the anceps is always treated as long to fill out the line. Another point of flexibility comes in the second half of each dactyl (also called the *arsis*), where the poet may substitute a single long syllable for the pair of short syllables. The resulting foot is no longer a dactyl, but a **spondee** (— —). Note that substitution is not allowed in the first half of the dactyl (also called the *thesis*).

Syllabification. Determining the pattern of long and short syllables requires, of course, that you recognize the constituent syllables of a line. The basic rules of syllabification are:

1. Syllables are usually divided after a vowel and before a single consonant: vi-rum, not vir-um.
2. When a vowel is followed by two consonants in the same word, the division comes between the consonants: ar-ma, not arm-a or a-rma.
3. The exception to this rule when a vowel is followed by a **stop** (a consonant formed by complete air blockage, e.g. t, d, p, b, k, g) plus a **liquid** (a consonant that can be prolonged, e.g. l or r). So *patres* divides as pa-tres, not pat-res.

Example: the syllables of *arma virumque cano* are ar-ma vi-rum-que ca-no.

Pauses. Within every verse comes at least one opportunity for a pause, a brief halting during the reading of the line. This pause, called a **caesura** (Latin for "cut"), often accompanies a pause in sense, and lets one idea sink in before another is introduced. A caesura always appears in the middle of a foot, in one of two places: either between the thesis and the arsis (— || υυ) or within the arsis itself, between the two shorts (— υ || υ). A caesura after the thesis is called a **strong caesura**; one within the arsis is called a **weak caesura**. The principal caesura marks the most obvious pause in the sense, and is usually in the third foot. When the end of a foot also coincides with the end of a word, the resulting division is called a **diaeresis** ("division" in Greek).

BASIC RULES FOR DETERMINING IF A SYLLABLE IS LONG OR SHORT (AKA SCANNING)

A syllable is long if:

1. it is **long by nature**, i.e. contains a long vowel or a diphthong
 - long vowels are marked with a macron (N.B. that not all texts include macrons)
 - diphthongs = ae, au, ei, eu, oe (rarely ui)
2. it is **long by position**, i.e. a vowel followed by
 - two or more consonants (even if the consonants are in different words)
 - a “double consonant” (x = ks; z = sd)

If a syllable is not long, then it is short.

Notable caveats to the above rules:

1. as discussed above, the two shorts in the *arsis* can be replaced with a single long syllable (substitution). This is also called *resolution*.
2. a mute consonant (p, b, t, d, c, g) followed by a liquid (l, m, n, r) does NOT necessarily “make position” (make the preceding syllable long by position), just as it doesn’t count as a second consonant when dividing syllables (see above, **Syllabification**).
3. a consonant at the end of a word + “h” at the start of the next word does not make position.
4. If a word ends in a vowel, or a vowel + m, AND the next word begins with a vowel or initial “h”, the first vowel, and the “m” or “h” will be neither pronounced nor scanned. This is called elision and is marked thus: *vento et*. Although it may seem odd, a syllable formed by elision is not necessarily long. N.B. Elision occurs **within** a line, **not between** lines.

There are a few exceptions to this exception:

- If the 2nd word is *est*, the *e* in *est* is elided instead of the final vowel or –m syllable; e.g. *tuum est* > *tuum’est*, not *tu’est*
- If the –m syllable is long by nature, it usually will not be elided.
- Hiatus is when elision ought to occur, but doesn’t. It creates a **strong** break in the line.

Examples of elision: *vento et* reads and scans as “*vent’et*”; *dicere hos* as “*dicer’os*”

5. remember that “i” is sometimes a consonant (*iniuria*, *Iuppiter*)

6. su-, qu- and gu- before a vowel sound like one consonant : e.g. *suavis*, *quinque*

A SAMPLE SCANSION

— u u / — u u / — || — / — — / — u u / — —
Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris

— u u / — — / — || u u / — u u / — u u / — —
Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit

— u u / — — / — || — / — — / — u u / — —
litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto

— u u / — — / — || u u / — — / — u u / — —
vi superum saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram