

A SAMPLE SCANSION – CATULLUS 1.1

All meters have a basic form, consisting of a sequence of long and short syllables, to which a poet must adhere. In certain extremely rare instances, a competent poet may break from the scheme for particular effect. The process of determining the rhythm or meter of a line is called “**scanning**.”

Let’s take a look at the first poem in the Catullan corpus: *Catullus 1 (cui dono lepidum...)*

The commentary tells us that Catullus composed this poem in hendecasyllables (i.e. “eleven-syllables”), the metrical scheme for which is represented thus:

X X — U U — U — U — X

In schematic representations of meter, an **X** denotes a *syllable anceps*, a syllable that can be either long or short; — denotes a long syllable (*longum*); **U** denotes a short syllable (*breve*).

If we were to articulate the above pattern, we would say:

“anceps anceps long short short long short long short long anceps”

Now let’s examine the first line of *Catullus 1: cui dono lepidum nouum libellum*

The first step in scanning is to be able to differentiate the syllables of a line: simply put, a **syllable begins with a consonant or vowel and stops at its opposite**; i.e. if a syllable begins with a consonant, it ends with a vowel and vice versa; the only exception is if the syllable is followed by two or more consonants (e.g. *bellum*), in which case, the first consonant(s) will be included in the preceding syllable and the last consonant will start the following syllable (e.g. *bel-lum*). This is called a “closed syllable” and these syllables will be long (“long by position”). This is true even if the second consonant is in the next word.

In *Catullus 1.1* we find the following syllables: *cui-do-no-le-pi-dum-no-vum-li-bel-lum*.

Now let’s start scanning:

1. **cui**: according to the metrical scheme, the first syllable can be either long or short: since it is not long by nature (check a dictionary) or long by position (check the rules); it must be **short**.
2. **do**: this syllable can also be long or short: **do** is not long by position, but it is **long** by nature.
3. **no**: should be long: it is **long** by nature.
4. **le**: should be short: it is not long by nature or by position; it must be **short**.
5. **pi**: should be short: it is not long by nature or by position; it must be **short**.
6. **dum**: should be long; since **dum** ends in a –m, we should be on the lookout for elision. Since the next word begins with a consonant, there is no elision but it does cause **dum** to be a “closed syllable.” As a vowel followed by 2 consonants, it is **long** by position (*mn*).
7. **no**: should be short: it is not long by nature or by position; it must be **short**.
8. **vum**: same as in #6 (*ml*).
9. **li**: should be short: it is not long by nature or long by position; it must be **short**.
10. **bel**: should be long; **long** by position (*ll*).
11. **lum**: can be either long or short; it is at the end of the line, so it is not long by position; it should be **short** by position; **BUT** to signal the end of a verse, the last syllable of a line is usually lengthened.

On a scanning worksheet, we would represent this information thus:

U — — U U — U — U — —
c u i d o n o l e p i d u m n o u u m l i b e l l u m

Now you are ready to scan... BONAM FORTUNAM