

INTRODUCTION TO GREEK METER

All ancient poems are composed in accordance to one of a variety of **meters**, consisting of a sequence of long and short syllables. The patterns of long and short syllables create the rhythm (*ῥυθμὸς*) of the poetry. The interaction of accent with a poem's pattern of longs and shorts that creates the full musicality of Greek verse. The process of determining the rhythm or meter of a line is called "**scanning**."

As a general rule, a long syllable (denoted by the symbol —) takes twice as long to pronounce as a short syllable (υ).

A syllable is long if:

1. its vowel is **long by nature**, *i.e.* contains a long vowel or a diphthong
 - a. $\bar{a}, \bar{i}, \eta, \bar{i}, \bar{v}, \omega$
 - b. diphthongs = $au, \epsilon i, \eta i, oi, vi, av, \epsilon v, ov$

OR

2. it is **long by position**, *i.e.* it is a "closed" syllable, terminating in a consonant. In most circumstances, a syllable is closed if its vowel is followed by:
 - a. two or more consonants (even if the consonants are in different words)
 - b. a so-called double consonant ($\xi = \kappa\sigma; \zeta = \sigma\delta; \psi = \pi\zeta$)

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

*** Notable modifications and clarifications to the above rules ***

1. a mute consonant ($\pi, \beta, \varphi, \tau, \delta, \theta, \kappa, \gamma, \chi$) followed by a nasal (μ, ν) or liquid (λ, ρ) does not necessarily "make position" (*i.e.* make the preceding syllable long by position)
2. aspiration does not a a consonant make: initial aspiration in a word (*e.g.* $\acute{\omega}\varsigma$) does not make position; φ, θ, χ are not double consonants.

Most metrical patterns have natural positions in their schemes where a brief pause occurs. This pause is called a **caesura**. If the end of a metrical foot coincides with a end of a word, the natural pause is called a **diaeresis**. Each meter will have different places where these pauses tend to occur.

SOME BASIC METRICAL VOCABULARY FOR GREEK POETRY

Halporn et al. = J.W. Halporn, M. Ostwald & T.G. Rosenmeyer, *The Meters of Greek and Latin Poetry*, rev. ed., Indianapolis/Cambridge/Norman 1980 (and later reprints).

caesura: the regular pause or "cutting" of a metrical foot, particularly near the midpoint of a poetic line; denoted by a |; it is more strongly felt when reinforced by a word grouping and/or punctuation.

diaeresis: a slight pause in mid-line where the end of a word matches the end of a metrical foot; functions in the same manner as a caesura; denoted by a || or four vertical dots.

elision: the suppression of a final vowel before an initial vowel in the following word.

lyric: literally "(sung to) the lyre"; this adjective refers generally to poetry that mixes various kinds of rhythmical units, not just repeating the same kind of rhythm over and over, in order to form a larger, rhythmically varied stanza.

meter: The rhythmical pattern in which a period of poetry is composed.

metron: "measure". The smallest metrical unit, consisting of a given sequence and number of long and short elements, of a period made up of several such units.

responsion: The parallelism of metric schemes between strophe and strophe or strophe and antistrophe.

stichic: literally "by line"; this adjective refers to poetry in the form of repetition of a single rhythmic line, rather than the mixture of different lines within a stanza to form a rhythmically varied unit. It is sometimes (not always) used to contrast a style of poetry with lyric's stanza format. (But of course lyric poetry can include some repeated lines in a particular metrical scheme as well, so the contrast is not complete.)

Let's take a look at the first line of Sappho 31

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

— **υ** — **χ** | — **υ υ** — | **υ** — —

In schematic representations of meter, an **Χ** denotes a *syllable anceps*, a syllable that can be either long or short; **υ** denotes a long syllable (*longum*); **υ** denotes a short syllable (*breve*). The | indicates a natural pause in the line (caesura or diaresis).

If we were to articulate the above pattern, we would say:
“long short long anceps long short shot long short long long”

Now let's examine the first line of Sappho 31: φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοισιν...

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. the first syllabus of **τεθνᾶκην**), 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. **τεθ-νᾶ-κην**). 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 31.1 we find the following syllables: φαί-νε-ταί-μοι-κῆ-νο-ς ἴ-σο-ς-θέ-οι-σι-ν.

Now let's start scanning:

1. **φαί**: according to the metrical scheme, the first syllable should be long... and it is. It contains a diphthong, which is **long** by nature.
2. **νε**: this syllable should be short: the vowel is not long by nature or position, so it is **short**.
3. **ταί**: should be long: it is **long** by nature (diphthong).
4. **μοι**: can be long or short: it is not long by nature, but it contains a diphthong, so it is **long** by nature).
5. **κῆ**: should be long: it contains a long vowel, and so is **long** by nature.
6. **νο**: should be short; it is not long by nature or by position; it is **short**.
7. **ς**: should be short: it is not long by nature or by position; it is **short**.
8. **σο**: should be long; the vowel is not long by nature, but the syllable is closed, so it is **long** by position.
9. **θέ**: should be short: it is not long by nature or long by position; it must be **short**.
10. **οισ**: should be long; **long** by nature (diphthong).
11. **ιν**: it is not long by nature or position; **BUT** to signal the end of a verse, the last syllable of a line is usually lengthened, regardless of the actual quantity of that syllable

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

— **υ** — — | — **υ υ** — | **υ** — —
φαί ν ε τ α ί μ ο ι κ ῆ ν ο ς ἴ σ ο ς θ έ ο ι σ ι ν