

THE RHYTHM OF LATIN POETRY :: SCANNING METER

The patterning of rhythm and sound in poetry (also known as *prosody*) is an important foundation of the artistic value of poetry, helping to structure meaning and reinforcing or subverting the explicit meaning of a phrase. The basic element of Latin prosody is the *meter* of the poem.

The most crucial distinction between Latin and English meter 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.

These patterns of long and short syllables create the rhythm of the poetry. The process of identifying which syllables are long and which are short is called “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 in a dictionary (e.g. ā)
 - ▶ diphthongs are ae, au, ei, eu, oe (sometimes 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);
e.g. *ēst mēns dēdūcta* (Catullus 75.1)
 - ▶ a double consonant (x = ks; z = sd); e.g. *dilēxi tum te* (Catullus 72.3)

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

*** Notable modifications to the above rules:

1. two shorts can often substitute for a long. This is called *resolution*. In metrical schema, resolution is marked thus: $\bar{u} \bar{u}$
2. a mute consonant (p, b, t, d, c, g) followed by a liquid (l, m, n, r) does NOT necessarily make the preceding syllable long.
3. when a word ends with a consonant and is followed by a word beginning with *h*, that syllable is not long by position: e.g. *amāt hunc*
4. remember that "i" is sometimes a consonant (*iniuria*, *Iuppiter*)
5. su-, qu- and gu- before a vowel sound like one consonant : e.g. *sua-vis*, *quin-que*
6. ELISION: If a word ends in a vowel (e.g. *vento*), or a vowel + m (e.g. *vitam*), AND the next word begins with a vowel or *h*, the vowel, and the m/h are not scanned and generally not pronounced.¹ This is called elision and is marked thus: *vento et*. Although it may seem odd, a syllable formed by elision is not necessarily long, as the first, or elided, vowel, is not pronounced.

Examples of elision:

vento et reads and scans as “vent’et”

dicere hos as “dicer’os”

There are a few modifications to the rule of elision:

- If the –m syllable is long by nature, it usually will not be elided.
- Hiatus is when elision ought to occur, but doesn't.
- If the second word is *est*, the *e* in *est* is elided instead of the final vowel or –m syllable. This is called “prodelision”; e.g. *tuum est* elides as *tuum’st*

¹ When reading, it is typical to suppress the elided syllables entirely; although many experts believe they should be pronounced lightly.