

BASIC TERMS AND RULES OF LATIN POETRY

I. Terminology

A. The two basic terms are *foot* and *meter*.

Foot: the smallest characteristic group of syllables in a rhythmical pattern.

Meter: the measured arrangements of syllables in a regular rhythmical pattern.

B. Meter is divided into two categories, quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative Meter: meter based on length of syllable, as typical of Greek and Latin poetry.

Qualitative Meter: meter based on stress quality of a syllable, as typical of English poetry.

C. Syllables are classified by their length, long or short, which are defined in apposition to one another. Hence, a

Long Syllable is twice as long to pronounce as a **short syllable**.

D. The pronunciation of Latin verse is affected by **elision** and **hiatus**.

Elision: when a word ends with a vowel or diphthong, or a vowel followed by 'm' and the following word begins with a vowel or diphthong or a vowel or diphthong preceded by 'h,' the final syllable of the first word and the beginning syllable of the next word were slurred together, or *elided* into a single syllable.

Ex. Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior. (Catullus 85)

When scanning, we would mark the elisions as follows:

Odi **N** amo. Quare**N** faciam, fortasse requiris.
Nescio, sed fieri sentio**N** excrucior.

Hiatus ("yawning"): occurs when elision is ignored.

Ex. O factum male! O miselle passer! (Catullus 3.16)

When scanning, we would mark the hiatus as follows:

O factum male! | O miselle passer!

E. Classification of Rhythms in Feet

Anapest: a foot of three syllables, two shorts followed by a long: **776**

Dactyl: a foot of three syllables, a long followed by two shorts: **677**

Iamb: a foot of two syllables, a short followed by a long syllable: **76**

Spondee: a foot of two syllables, both long: **66**

Trochee: a foot of two syllables, a long followed by a short: **67**

F. Additional Technical Terms

Arsis: the unaccent part of the foot.

Caesura: a caesura is a pause. The principal caesura usually occurs after the *thesis of the third foot*. It may also occur after the *thesis of the fourth foot*. In such an instance there is often a second caesura in the second foot, making the line divide into three parts. A caesura occurring after the first syllable of a foot is described as being “masculine,” after the second foot “feminine.” A caesura normally does not occur in the first or sixth foot. In scansion, it is also written as 5.

Ex. Noli admirari, 5 quare tibi femina nulla (Catullus 69.1)

Diaeresis: the ending of a word and foot together within the verse.

Ictus: In every fundamental foot, the long syllable naturally receives the greater prominence. This prominence is called the **Ictus**.

Thesis: the syllable which receives the *ictus*.

II. Rules of Syllabification

Syllabification

A Latin word contains as many syllables as it has vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and diphthongs (ae, au, ei, oe, ui).

1. Two contiguous vowels or a vowel and a diphthong are separated.
Ex.: beatus = be-a-tus; dea = de-a; deae = de-ae.
2. A single consonant between two vowels goes with the second vowel.
Ex.: amicus = a-mi-cus; Cicero = Ci-ce-ro.
3. When two or more consonants stand between vowels, generally only the last consonant goes with the second vowel.
Ex.: barbarus = bar-ba-rus; mitto = mit-to; servare = ser-va-re.
4. Initial consonant (or consonants) belongs to first syllable, final consonant to last.
Ex.: Caesar = Cae-sar; Marius = Mar-i-us.
5. A syllable ending in a vowel or diphthong is called *open*; all others are called *closed*.
6. The last syllable of a word is called the *ultima*; the next to last is called the *penult*; the one before the *penult* is called the *antepenult*.
Ex. Pompeius = Pom (antepenult) - pei (penult) - us (ultima).

Syllable quantity

1. A syllable is *long by nature* if it contains a long vowel or a diphthong: **v -nscrsc**
cau-sae.
2. A syllable is *long by position* if it contains a short vowel followed by **x, z**, or any two or more consonants except a mute (**b, d, g, p, t, c**) followed by **l** or **r**.
3. A syllable is *short by* if it contains a short vowel followed by a vowel or by a single consonant (h is regarded as a consonant; ch, th, qu, and sometimes gu and su): **me-us, ni-hil, ge-rit, a-qua**.
4. A syllable is *short by* if it contains a short vowel followed by a mute (**b, d, g, p, t, c**) plus **l** or **r**.

Accent

The last syllable of a word is called the *ultima*; the next to last is called the *penult*; the one before the *penult* is called the *antepenult*.

1. In a word of two syllables, the accent always falls on the first syllable.
2. In a word of three or more syllables (a) the accent falls on the next to last syllable (the *penult*), if that syllable is long; (b) otherwise, the accent falls on the syllable before that (the *antepenult*), i.e. the next-to-next-to-last syllable.

A syllable ending in a vowel or diphthong is called *open*; all others are called *closed*.

Quantity of Vowels

1. A vowel is **long** or **short** according to the length of time required for its pronunciation.
2. A vowel is long:
 - a. before **ns, nf**, and perhaps **gn**: **ing'ns, sf~ns, m~gnus**.
 - b. when resulting from a contraction: **nil = n00 c00 = c4|g0**
3. A vowel is short:
 - a. before another vowel or h: **d, a, tr |h0**
 - b. generally before **nd** and **nt**: **am |ndus, am |nt**.
4. Diphthongs are long: **cau-sae**.