

Introduction to Latin Verse and Scansion

Classical Latin verse is based on the rhythm formed by patterns of long (also called heavy) and short (also called light) syllables.

A long syllable nominally takes twice as long to pronounce as a short syllable.

Familiarity with which syllables are long and which are short will come with practice. A good start is to get into the habit of pronouncing Latin correctly!

A long syllable is indicated by a horizontal line above it (—). This symbol is called a **macron**. For example, clāmo (I shout).

A short syllable is indicated by a cup-like symbol above it (˘). This symbol is called a **breve**. For example, vidēt (he sees).

Sometimes you will see these symbols in Latin dictionaries or wordlists. There are lots of hints about knowing which syllables are long or short, but we'll deal with these later.

Scansion is the term which deals with analysing the patterns of rhythms and syllables within lines of Latin poetry.

The most common lines of Latin poetry you will meet are called **dactylic hexameters**. 'hex' means six – this sort of line is divided into six metrical units called **feet**. This is represented as follows:

1 2 3 4 5 6
— ˘˘ | — ˘˘ | — ˘˘ | — ˘˘ | — ˘˘ | — ×

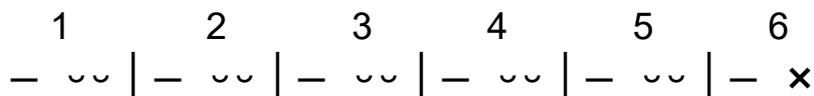
(The × at the end of the line indicates that this syllable could be a long or a short one. Sometimes this is also written as ˘).

As you can see, each metrical foot is separated from its neighbour by a vertical line, like this: |

Dactylic is the adjective formed from the noun **dactyl**. A dactyl is a metrical foot consisting of one long syllable followed by two short syllables, like this:

— ˘˘

The word 'dactyl' (as in *pterodactyl* – wing-finger) comes from the Greek word for 'finger' (δάκτυλος, dactylos) – a finger consisting of one long bone with two shorter bones on the end of it.



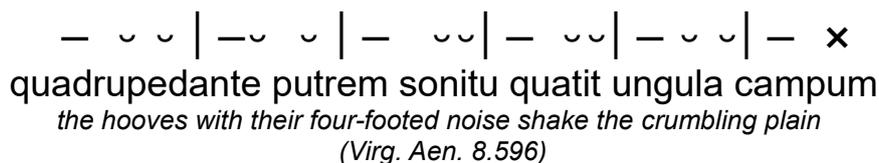
As you can see from the scheme repeated above, dactyls occupy the first five feet of the line. The sixth foot can be either a long-long or a long-short: (– – or – ∪).

The technical term for a long-long metrical foot is **spondee**.

The technical term for a long-short metrical foot is a **trochee**.

And, as just covered, the term for a long-short-short metrical foot is a **dactyl**.

Here is a sample line of Latin poetry which follows this hexameter scheme:



As you can imagine, hundreds of lines using the same scheme could become tedious on the ear, so some variety was allowed in any or all of the first four feet, where the two shorter syllables could be replaced by a single long one. In other words, a foot called a dactyl could be replaced by a foot called a spondee, as follows:



Here's an example of such a line:



As you can see, the fifth and sixth feet keep the same pattern:



A metrical foot consisting of two long syllables (— —) is, as we've seen, called a spondee. Spondaic lines slow the speed of the line down, whereas dactylic lines speed them up.

Elision

This word means 'striking out', and happens when bits of words disappear in order to make things easier to say. For example, it's usual to say *fish 'n' chip(s) shop* in English rather than *fish and chips shop*.

In Latin verse you will find elisions at the end of words which have a final syllable ending with a vowel or an -m when these words are followed by a word beginning with a vowel or an h.

For example: *difficil(e) est, vestr(um) est bon(i) homines*
it is difficult it is yours good men

When you are required to write out (scan) a line of poetry, the final elided letters are bracketed off:

For example:

vestibulum ante ipsum primoque in limine Pyrrhus
in front of the actual forecourt and on the first threshold Pyrrhus ...
(Virg. Aen. 2.469)

becomes, when the elisions are marked:

vestibul(um) ant(e) ipsum primoqu(e) in limine Pyrrhus

The elided syllables are not counted when it comes to scanning the line. So this line will be scanned as follows:

— ∪ ∪ | — — | — — | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — ×
vestibul(um) ant(e) ipsum primoqu(e) in limine Pyrrhus

Before attempting to write out the scansion of a line of Latin poetry, the first thing you must do is check whether there are any elisions.

Here's an example of elision happening before a word beginning with an h:

— — | — ∪ ∪ | — — | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — ×
pallentesqu(e) habitant Morbi tristisque Senectus
and pale diseases and grim old age live (there)...
(Virg. Aen. 6.275)

The caesura

Once the elisions have been spotted, and the metrical feet established, the final job is to mark the main pause in the line. This is called the **caesura**, which means a cutting. This is marked with a sign like this: // or this: ||.

The caesura must be in the middle of a foot and at the end of a word. The third foot is the favourite place for a caesura, or the second or fourth – but nowhere else.

Here is an example of a third foot caesura:

– ∪ ∪ | – – | – // – | – – | – ∪ ∪ | – x
vestibul(um) ant(e) ipsum primoqu(e) in limine Pyrrhus

And here is an example of a fourth foot caesura:

– – | – ∪ ∪ | – – | – // – | – ∪ ∪ | – x
pallentesqu(e) habitant Morbi tristisque Senectus

The main caesura in a line will usually coincide with a break in the sense, or modern punctuation.