How to Scan

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1. Purpose.

It is better to have someone teach you to scan, than to try to learn for yourself from books or other material you may find online.

This document is intended to help those who may not have access to such tuition; and it may also be useful for teachers, to reinforce what they say in class. It is based on the things I tend to say, when teaching people to scan, and on observation of the aspects which people have found difficult or tended to get wrong.

It does not attempt to cover every detail; in particular, I have tried to avoid or limit technical jargon, and to leave out weird or unusual aspects of metre.

It is mainly concerned with the Latin dactylic hexameter, which is where people normally start; there are a few remarks on approaching other metres at the end.

It is not a list of the rules of metre; these can be found in most grammar books, but it is not easy for beginners to apply them in a practical way. Instead, it is attempting to answer the question, 'How do I actually go about scanning some lines?'

Scanning is an essential tool for those who want to try writing Latin verse; I think it is also pretty much essential for anyone who wants to read Latin verse, since to ignore the rhythm of the poetry is to miss out on a large part of its beauty, and to misunderstand how it was constructed. It may seem daunting, if you haven't done it before. However, it is not as difficult as all that, and well worth the modest effort involved.

2. Getting started: applying the two main rules.

I assume you already know what a hexameter is: six feet, either dactyls or spondees, with the last foot always a spondee, and the fifth foot almost always a dactyl.

One practical point to start: I recommend writing a few lines out on paper, with wide gaps between them, rather than attempting to put the marks in the small space between the lines of a book. It is easy to get confused, in a confined space; and if you make errors and have to erase them, as most people do, then you end up with an unreadable mess.

You may as well do the easy bits first. Mark the sixth foot as a spondee (in all metres, the final syllable never matters – even if it is naturally short, the pause at the end of the line lengthens it). Look at the fifth foot: unless you think you are dealing with a fifth-foot spondee, which is rare, you can mark it as a dactyl. The very first syllable of the line is always long (since both dactyls and spondees start with a long).

That was the easy part; the rest is a little more challenging. What we need to do is work out which pattern of dactyls and spondees is used in the first four feet. We can assume, if we are reading a text by (say) Vergil, that Vergil has got it right. Of course, when trying to write our

own verse, that does not apply, and we need to know for ourselves that each syllable is correct.

There are two main rules that we need to apply, before going further. Sometimes, they are sufficient to solve the problem; sometimes it requires some more thought.

They are (a) elision; and (b) the two-consonant rule.

Both are straight-forward in essence, but contain some quirks which it is important to note, and which form the basis of the following sections.

So, how to get going: look through the line to see if there are any elisions, and mark them where you see them. (Very occasionally, poets choose not to elide, where the rules suggest they ought to: this is called hiatus, and is an abnormal feature worth commenting on, if you are discussing the poetry, not a normal everyday choice. Exclamations like 'o!' are not usually elided.) You can use whatever mark you prefer: putting brackets round the syllable which is elided can work well, and reminds us that elision means the complete ignoring of the first syllable – only the second syllable counts (it is not a merging of two syllables, but the replacement of the first by the second, regardless of their respective lengths).

Then look for instances of the two-consonant rule: that a vowel followed by two consonants, either within the same word, or between two words, is long.

3. Elision: points to note.

Elision happens when a word ends with a vowel, and the next word starts with a vowel. You need to know what is a vowel, and what isn't.

That sounds obvious, but there are some pitfalls.

First, you need to know the habits of the text you are using. The letters 'i' and 'u' can be consonants as well as vowels. Some texts print 'v' when 'u' is a consonant, and some don't; it is now rare to find 'j' printed when 'i' is a consonant, but you will find it in many older books (including, rather importantly, Lewis and Short's dictionary). Prissy philologists may dislike 'v' and 'j', but they are actually quite useful to the practical versifier, since they save us the trouble of working out when these letters are consonants.

Nevertheless, it is not hard to work out; one just needs to remember to do so. In words like 'iam' and 'iacet', the 'i' is clearly a consonant. The implication of that, is that it is must be treated as a consonant in every respect: it does *not* elide, if the previous word ends in a vowel; and if the previous word ends in a consonant, the two-consonant rule *does* apply.

Remember also that 'h' does not count as a consonant. Just ignore it. So words starting with 'h' *do* elide, when the previous word ends in a vowel.

Most importantly, words ending in 'm' (so all those accusatives in '-am', '-um', '-em', and genitive plurals in '-um') *do* elide, when followed by a vowel. In this one instance, they seem to have felt that 'm' wasn't a strong enough consonant to prevent elision; it *is*, however, a proper consonant in all other respects. So, while '-um' etc are, notionally, short syllables, you

will never find them as such: if followed by a vowel, they will elide; and if followed by a consonant, they will be long under the two-consonant rule.

4. Two-consonant rule: points to note.

This rule applies within a word, and when a word ending with a consonant is followed by a word that starts with one: so, very commonly, syllables that are naturally short, such as verbs in '-it', '-et' or '-at', are lengthened by the consonant at the start of the next word. But the rule does *not* apply when a word ends with a vowel, and both consonants are in the second word. (It does in Greek: but this is one feature the Romans chose not to borrow.)

There is one irritating exception: not as common as all that, but common enough to be a nuisance to the scanner (and an occasional help to the versifier). It applies *only* within a word, *not* when the two consonants are in separate words. It is called – using a couple of irritating linguistic terms – the 'mute and liquid' rule. That is, when (and only when) the first consonant is a so-called mute, and the second a so-called liquid (in that order, not the other way around), the syllable is ambiguous, to be taken as either long or short according to the poet's preference. In such cases, therefore, we need to work out by other means which length the poet did choose. One may think at this stage, that these Romans were annoying people: not content with invading Gaul, and enjoying watching gladiators, they can't even decide on what a proper consonant is. Try not to despair, because in practice it is manageable.

The list of 'mutes' is quite long – I wouldn't bother trying to memorise it – and includes 'c' and 'b'; there are fewer 'liquids' – the one you meet most often is 'r'. In practice, this is not unbearably confusing, because there are relatively few common words where this rule applies. Two such are 'tenebrae' and 'lacrima'.

The placement of words in the line tends to show whether the poet chose to use an ambiguous syllable as long or short. If 'lacrima' starts a line, the first 'a' must be long; when 'tenebrae' ends a line, the middle syllable must be long. When either of them is found in the middle of the line ('lacrima' would be in another case, e.g. 'lacrimae') it is likely that the ambiguous syllable is short.

But when in doubt, leave that method of judgement aside, and move on to our next set of tricks.

5. What next? Some uses of logic.

Most often, the application of the main rules is not enough to solve the whole puzzle. There are two basic ways to proceed (which are not incompatible): check things in the dictionary, and use some logic. Normally, it is possible to be certain of the answer just by using logic, and therefore not necessary to know, or to check, the length of all syllables in a line. But there will be lines in which logic is not enough: the only thing to do then, if you cannot be sure about some words, is to look them up.

First, you can mark any syllables which logic dictates must be long. Since shorts always come in pairs in this metre, any single unknown syllable between two longs must itself be

long. Remember that diphthongs are long (but that, occasionally, one can be caught out by two vowels next to each other which are *not* a diphthong, but two separate syllables).

Also mark any syllables you know, from your knowledge of the grammar. Most endings are predictable: so the '-os' or '-as' of accusative plurals will always be long. An ending in '-is' will be long if it is a dative or ablative plural; but short if it is the nominative or genitive of a third declension word. Generally '-us' will be short by nature (as are both syllables of '-ibus'); but watch out for the '-us' in fourth declension words, which is long in some cases. When a word ends in '-e', ask yourself what kind of word it is: '-que' is short; third declension ablatives and second declension vocatives are short; adverbs in '-e' are generally long (with a few irregular exceptions like 'bene'). And so on …

Then, you can apply logic in a different way. How many syllables, and how many feet, are left uncertain? If you have only one foot left, it is easy: two syllables, and it must be a spondee; three, and it must be a dactyl. For two feet: four syllables means two spondees; six syllables means two dactyls; and five syllables means one of each, and you must therefore use some other means to work out which order they come in. The same logic can apply to three or four uncertain feet (though it is unusual to find all four uncertain by this stage); three feet, and seven syllables, for example, means that there is one dactyl among them; eight syllables means two dactyls and one spondee.

One small point to remember: you do need to be certain about what is and isn't a syllable. I mentioned above that, while two vowels together are usually a diphthong (i.e. one syllable), sometimes they aren't: so we have 'aes' [bronze], one syllable; but 'aer' [air], two syllables. Another letter which should not be counted is the 'u' that follows 'q' – it is treated as part of the consonant; the same applies to the 'u' in 'lingua' (two syllables: not 'ling-u-a'); while 'suavis' is ambiguous, generally two syllables but sometimes taken as three. And make sure you haven't missed any elisions …

Pronunciation can be a help, in working out these unknown syllables. But beware of trusting in it too much. If you are used to taking a lot of care about longs and shorts, and maybe use texts which mark long syllables with a macron, then perhaps it will be a reliable guide. But many of us do not take such care, in normal use, and so must make a point of doing so, when scanning, and especially so when writing verse (where my advice is to *check everything*, and *not* to rely on one's memory of quantities). Remember that Latin has a stress accent, which affects our pronunciation, but that this is not the same as a long syllable. For example, I have found the word 'femina' is often scanned wrongly; we tend to say 'feh-mina' rather than 'FAY-mina' – however, the 'e' is a long syllable. And the word 'carmina' can be mispronounced: it should be 'CAR-mina' (the stress accent falls on the first syllable; the 'i' is short), and not 'car-MEE-na' – yet it seems invariably to be the latter, at least when the work 'Carmina Burana' by Orff is played on the radio. Still, if I started shouting at the radio, 'No, no, no: it's CAR-mina not car-MEE-na', then I guess I would be taken as even crazier than I am. (If it offends, just turn it orff.)

In scanning verse, then, we must learn to be fussy about some things which, in normal usage, we may not pay much attention to.

Logic and precision will usually solve the puzzle. If in doubt, though – and to check that your logic was correct – do reach for a dictionary and grammar to check the quantity of syllables.

The grammar will tell you about endings, and most dictionaries indicate in some way the length of any doubtful syllable in a stem (though you may need to familiarise yourself with what they take for granted and don't bother to indicate).

6. The main caesura.

When you have worked out where the dactyls and spondees go – and hopefully the techniques mentioned above will be sufficient to do so – there is one further thing to consider: the main caesura.

A caesura is a break between words *within* a foot (as opposed to a word-ending coinciding with the end of a foot). A line usually has several; but the only one we are interested in is the *main* caesura, near the centre of the verse, which splits it into two not-quite-equal halves (two and a half feet, and three and a half feet). This is a vital part of the hexameter: those wishing to write verse, must ensure that they pay attention to it.

Most often, the main caesura is in the third foot. Otherwise, it is in the fourth.

A reasonably common variation, is the combination of a so-called weak caesura in the third foot, with a strong caesura in the fourth. By 'weak' here, we mean a break after the first short syllable of a dactyl; a strong caesura, either in a dactyl or a spondee, comes after the first (long) syllable.

Mark the main caesura with some mark that distinguishes it from the foot-divisions: a wavy line would do; people sometimes use two vertical lines.

Now, once you have scanned a few lines successfully, it is a good idea to try reading them aloud. (There are plenty of different views on how to read Latin: I wouldn't want to impose any particular method – do what appeals to you most; the important thing is to get a sense, as you read, of how the rhythm is working.)

It may be that you are stuck on some line or other. There are two possibilities here: either you have missed something (e.g. not spotted an elision; failed to apply the two-consonant rule correctly; miscounted the syllables; copied it out wrongly); or there is something funny going on, one of the weird and wonderful things which poets sometimes allowed themselves to do, and which I am not going into here. If you want to check for the latter, most grammar books have a thorough discussion of what can happen; and if you are using a text with a good commentary, it may mention any unusual metrical features. For beginners, I would recommend not worrying about it too much: go on to practice with some more lines, and when you can be confident that they are mostly right, you will probably have cracked it. You can try asking someone else later, or do your own more detailed research, about the problematic lines.

7. Other metres.

Many other metres you may wish to scan are in fact easier than the dactylic hexameter.

Elegiac couplets have a hexameter and a pentameter. The latter is easier. You need to remember, though, that despite its name it does *not* consist of five feet, one after the other (as the hexameter consists of six feet). It consists of two half-lines, each of two and a half feet. A 'half foot' in this sense is a single long syllable. (Mathematical geniuses may appreciate that this adds up to five.)

The second half of the pentameter is very easy to scan: it always consists of two dactyls, plus a final long syllable (and remember that the final syllable of any line is ambiguous, and can be taken as long even when short by nature). To scan the first half: mark the final long syllable, just before the caesura (noting that the caesura of a pentameter *does* divide the line exactly in half, and so works rather differently to that in the hexameter). Then you have two feet (each either dactyl or spondee) left to work out, in the normal way.

Lyric metres are also quite easy to scan, though challenging to write. This is because they tend to have a fixed metrical scheme, with very few allowable variations; so there is no bother about working about which feet are which (and indeed one can more or less ignore feet altogether, though some grammarians may wish to use them in analysing the verse-forms). Naturally, you need to know what metre you are working with, and keep its pattern to hand. Then, you can just apply the pattern to each line of your text, taking care to look for elisions as you do so. Some metres have just one or two uncertain syllables, which you need to work out (or check) in the normal way: so, in the Catullan hendecasyllable, you can occasionally find a short in either the first or second position in the line.

Iambics are more difficult, posing similar problems to the dactylic hexameter. You need to keep in mind the basic scheme, and the allowable variations in it (which are quite numerous, though of varying frequency). The basic scheme – for a six foot iambic line – consists of six iambs, which may often be replaced by spondees, in the first, third, and fifth feet (but *not* in the second, fourth, and sixth). The wackier variations consist of breaking up either an iamb or a spondee, by replacing a long with two shorts.

8. Good luck.

And that's all there is to it – at least, all that I think worth bothering a beginner with. I am sorry it has taken several pages and about 3,000 words to explain it. Possibly one could be more concise, but at the risk of missing out some warnings, of matters which I know have caused trouble to some people. One could certainly be more verbose, and also offer examples (which can be found elsewhere) of applying these techniques to some lines of verse. But I hope this is enough to be helpful. Once you get used to it, it really is not hard to do. Good luck with it.