Basic Guide to Latin Meter and Scansion

LATIN POETRY FOLLOWS a strict rhythm based on the quantity of the vowel in each syllable. Each line of poetry divides into a number of feet (analogous to the measures in music). The syllables in each foot scan as "long" or "short" according to the parameters of the meter that the poet employs.

A vowel scans as "long" if

(1) it is long by nature (e.g., the ablative singular ending in the first declension: *puellā*);

(2) it is a diphthong: AE (*saepe*), AU (*laudat*), EI (*deinde*), EU (*neuter*), OE (*poena*), UI (*cui*);

(3) it is long by position—these vowels are followed by double consonants (*cantātae*) or a consonantal I (*Trōia*), X (*flexibus*), or Z.

All other vowels scan as "short."

A few other matters often confuse beginners:

(1) QU and GU count as single consonants (*sīc aquilam*; *linguā*);

(2) H does NOT affect the quantity of a vowel (*Bellus homō*: Martial 1.9.1, the -us in *bellus* scans as short);

(3) if a mute consonant (B, C, D, G, K, Q, P, T) is followed by L or R, the preceding vowel scans according to the demands of the meter, either long (*omnium patrōnus*: Catullus 49.7, the -a in *patrōnus* scans as long to accommodate the hendecasyllabic meter) OR short (*prō patriā*: Horace, *Carmina* 3.2.13, the first -a in *patriā* scans as short to accommodate the Alcaic strophe).

When two vowels elide, the first vowel drops out and does not affect the quantity of the elided syllable. Elision in Latin occurs if

(1) one word ends in a vowel or diphthong and the next one begins in a vowel (*Lesbia, atque amēmus*: Catullus 5.1);

(2) one word ends in a vowel or diphthong and the next one begins with H (*atque hīc*: Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.655); or

(3) one word ends in -UM, -AM, or -EM and the next word begins in a vowel (*quantum est*: Catullus 3.2).

An elided syllable scans according to the quantity of the **second** vowel. A hiatus (or very abrupt break in the scansion of a line) results from a failure to elide.

Most Latin meters utilize five different types of measures (the macron indicates a long vowel, the micron a short vowel):

- dactyl: — ∪ ∪   (example: *Lesbia*)
- spondee: — —   (example: *quārē*)
- iamb: ∪ —   (example: *regō*)
- trochee: — ∪   (example: *praeda*)
- choriamb: — ∪ ∪ — (example: *dēliciae*)

Note the following conventions:

- | marks the division between feet in dactylic lines
- || marks the pause (hiatus) within a line
- x marks a syllable that can scan either long or short

There are thirteen meters represented in *NLP*:

Dactylic hexameter: six feet of dactyls. The first four feet can be either dactyls or spondees; the fifth foot is usually a dactyl; and the last foot scans as a spondee whether the last syllable is short or long.

$$— \overline{∪∪} \mid — \overline{∪∪} \mid — \overline{∪∪} \mid — \overline{∪∪} \mid — ∪∪ \mid — x$$

Elegiac couplets: alternating lines of dactylic hexameter and dactylic pentameter. In the pentameter line, the first two feet may be dactyls or spondees, but the rest of the line follows a set pattern.

$$— \overline{\cup\cup} \mid — \overline{\cup\cup} \mid — \overline{\cup\cup} \mid — \overline{\cup\cup} \mid — \cup\cup \mid — x$$
$$— \overline{\cup\cup} \mid — \overline{\cup\cup} \mid — \parallel — \cup\cup \mid — \cup\cup \mid x$$

Hendecasyllabics: lines of eleven syllables in five feet. The first foot may be a spondee, iamb, or trochee, followed by a dactyl, two trochees, and finally a spondee or trochee.

$$\underline{\cup}\,\overline{\cup} — \cup\cup — \cup — \cup — x$$

Limping iambics (known also as choliambics or scazons): five iambs capped off with a trochee or spondee. A spondee may be substituted in the first and third foot.

$$\overline{\cup} — \cup — \overline{\cup} — \cup — \cup — — x$$

Iambic Trimeter: three pairs of iambs with flexibility to substitute spondees in the first, third, and fifth foot.

$$\overline{\cup} — \cup — \overline{\cup} \parallel — \cup — \overline{\cup} — \cup\, x$$

Iambic strophe: alternating lines of iambic trimeter (three pairs of iambs) and iambic dimeter (two pairs of iambs) with flexibility to substitute spondees in the first, third, and fifth foot of the trimeter line, and in the first and third foot of the dimeter line.

$$\overline{\cup} — \cup — \overline{\cup} \parallel — \cup — \overline{\cup} — \cup\, x$$
$$\overline{\cup} — \cup — \overline{\cup} — \cup\, x$$

Galliambics: meter used in Catullus 63 (*NLP* 36.15) to celebrate the goddess Cybele. The name refers to the Galli, a retinue of castrated priests devoted to her worship.

$$\cup\cup — \cup — \cup — — \parallel \cup\cup — \cup\cup\cup\cup\, x$$

Sapphic strophe (in honor of Sappho of Lesbos, fl. seventh–sixth century BCE): a four-verse stanza, with the same metrical pattern in the first three lines.

— U — — — ‖ UU — U — x
— U — — — ‖ UU — U — x
— U — — — ‖ UU — U — x
  — UU — x

Alcaic strophe (in honor of the Greek poet Alcaeus of Lesbos, born c. 630 BCE): a four-verse stanza, with the same metrical pattern in the first two lines.

x — U — — ‖ — UU — U x
x — U — — ‖ — UU — U x
  x — U — — — U — x
   — UU — UU — U — x

First Asclepiadean (in honor of the Greek poet Asclepiades of Samos, fl. 290 BCE): a spondee followed by two choriambs, capped off with an iamb.

— — — UU — ‖ — UU — U x

Second Asclepiadean (likewise inspired by the Greek poet Asclepiades): a Glyconic line (see this example) followed by a line of First Asclepiadean.

— — — UU — U x
  — — — UU — ‖ — UU — U x

Fourth Asclepiadean (likewise inspired by the Greek poet Asclepiades): two lines of First Asclepiadean, followed by one Pherecratean line and one Glyconic line.

— — — UU — ‖ — UU — U x
— — — UU — ‖ — UU — U x
  — — — UU — x
   — — — UU — U x

Alcmanic Strophe (in honor of the Greek poet Alcman of Sparta, fl. 7th century BCE): one line of dactylic hexameter followed by one line of dactylic tetrameter.

— $\overline{UU}$ | — $\overline{UU}$ | — $\overline{UU}$ | — $\overline{UU}$ | — UU | — x
  — $\overline{UU}$ | — $\overline{UU}$ | — UU | — x