

# Mr. A's Introduction to Res Metrica

## INTRODUCTION

Latin poetry was basically rhythmic rather than rhyming. The effect of the poetry was conveyed in large part by the combinations of pleasing or unpleasing sounds (since the Romans are gone, however, there is some dispute about how they interpreted any given sound patterns; suffice it to say that a recurrence of particular sounds was intended to be somehow emphatic) and the alternation of long and short syllable patterns.

We will look at syllabification, metrics, and common interpretations of the sound and rhythmic patterns so that you can begin to scan Latin poetry. Scansion is the process of reading Latin poetry according to the sound and metrical patterns.

## SYLLABIFICATION: LONG or SHORT and SYLLABLE DIVISION

### Vowel Length

For purposes of Latin poetry, syllables can belong to one of three possible categories: long by nature, long by position, or short. When we refer to vowel/syllable length, we are referring to the inherent amount (or length) of time it takes to pronounce the syllable. Thus, the vowel *a* has the same sound in the Latin words for both “father” and “mother,” but the first syllables of “pater” and “māter” are pronounced for different lengths of time. Mā- should be held approximately twice as long as pa-. It is easiest to determine long syllables and figure out short syllables by process of elimination (if a syllable cannot be shown to be long, it must be short).

LONG. Syllables are long if:

1. they have a long vowel indicated by a long mark/macron over them in the dictionary or text (long by nature):  
cum puellā, futūrus, audīmus, urbēs.

2. they contain a diphthong (two vowels pronounced as one):  
ae, au, ei, eu, oe, ui.
3. they contain an otherwise short vowel followed by two or more consonants (long by position).
  - a. The two consonants may follow the vowel directly in the same word: dentis—short vowel *e* followed immediately by two consonants.
  - b. They may also be split between the end of that word and the start of the next: puer—short *e* by itself, but puer bonus—*e* followed by *r* in the same word + *b* at the start of the next word = two consonants, therefore the *e* is now considered long.
  - c. BUT if one word ends in a naturally short vowel and the next word begins with two or more consonants, the short vowel normally remains short: puella stat—the terminal *a* scans short.
  - d. NOTE: the double consonants *x* and *z* will make an immediately preceding vowel long even without additional consonants.
  - e. LESS IMPORTANT NOTE FOR BEGINNERS:  
These consonants, *b*, *c*, *d*, *f*, *g*, *p*, and *t*, if followed by *l* or *r* generally do not cause the preceding short vowel to become long.

SHORT. Otherwise, consider the syllable short (here underlined): puer est bonus, but why is the *e* in “est” long?

### Dividing Words into Syllables

When dividing Latin words into syllables for pronunciation purposes, read a single consonant between two vowels with the following syllable: li-ber. Consonant pairs between two vowels typically go one with each vowel: lib-ri. Is the *i* in each word considered long or short?

## METRICS

Let's begin this section by learning the symbols of metrics.

– = a metrically long syllable (whether by nature or by position)

∪ = a short syllable

| = a divider between metrical feet (the component pieces of the rhythmic patterns)

It is often possible within a metrical foot to substitute one long syllable for two shorts (— = ∪ ∪). Remember that length in Latin refers to the time it takes to say the syllable and not so much to the actual pronunciation of the vowels within it. This is not so different from English. Both “strength” and “at” are one syllable words, but it takes longer to say the first word because it has more letters in it. That's what Latin means by syllable length.

By tradition the last syllable is considered long, whether it really is or not (the syllable anceps). Again, this somewhat resembles English speech patterns. The last word in a sentence is often emphasized more than the words preceding it.

### Metrical Patterns

We will be concerned with the following metrical patterns throughout the year.

1. the dactyl (from the Greek word for “finger” because the first joint of the finger is longer than the other two): – ∪ ∪
2. the spondee: – –
3. the trochee: – ∪
4. the iamb (perhaps familiar to you from English class, iambs are very natural to the Germanic languages): ∪ –

These metrical patterns will combine in the following ways:

### Dactylic Hexameter

This is the basic pattern for the line:

=  $\overline{\cup\cup}$  | - -

Although the fifth foot may consist of a spondee (- -), it almost never does. When it does, the entire line is called a spondaic line.

### Dactylic Pentameter

This is the basic pattern for the line. The pentameter actually consists of two halves of two-and-a-half feet each:

=  $\overline{\cup\cup}$  | =  $\overline{\cup\cup}$  | - || -  $\cup\cup$  | -  $\cup\cup$  | -

The double bars (||) indicate a dramatic pause between the two halves of the line. This pause is called a diaresis. Dactylic hexameter also uses minor pauses called caesuras, but they are more difficult to determine, so we will not address them here. We will never see dactylic pentameter by itself, but only in combination with hexameter as follows:

### Elegiac Couplet

Dactylic hexameter + dactylic pentameter = elegiac couplet.

=  $\overline{\cup\cup}$  | - -  
=  $\overline{\cup\cup}$  | =  $\overline{\cup\cup}$  | - || -  $\cup\cup$  | -  $\cup\cup$  | -

### Hendecasyllabic

From the Greek word for “eleven,” this is the most common meter in Catullus.

$\overline{\cup\cup}$  | -  $\cup\cup$  | -  $\cup$  | -  $\cup$  | =  $\overline{\cup}$

## Elision

As in many languages, there are difficulties with vowel clash or hiatus. Just as we do not say “a apple,” Roman poets almost always avoided ending one word with a vowel and beginning the next word with a vowel as well. To achieve this, they practiced elision, that is, the omission of one of the vowels. This would be fairly simple except that they also elided two consonants, *h* and *m*, under certain circumstances. And sometimes they did not elide when they needed a word to fit the pattern.

Here’s the basic rule:

If one word ends in a vowel (or diphthong) and the next word begins with a vowel (or diphthong), drop the first vowel and smash the words together as you read them. For metrical purposes, the combined syllable has the length of the second syllable: *fēmina it*—*fēmina* it.

There are two modifications possible with this system:

1. if the second word begins with *h* + vowel, drop the first vowel and the *h*: *omnia haec* — *omnia* haec
2. if the first word ends in a vowel + *m*, drop the vowel and the *m*: *medium ad* — *medium* ad.

Let’s summarize the rules for elision. In the table that follows, any combination of given terminal + initial syllables will result in elision.

<u>Terminal Syllable</u>	<u>Initial Syllable</u>
vowel/diphthong	vowel/diphthong
vowel + m	h + vowel or diphthong

### Exception: Prodelision

When the second word is “est” or “es,” instead of deleting the first vowel, remove the *e* from the second:

*bonum est*—*bonum* est. (Some texts write such words as “*bonumst*.”)

## PRACTICE

Those are the basics. Now it's time to practice with Catullus 101.

### Hail and Farewell

Multās per gentēs et multa per aequora vectus

adveniō hās miserās, frāter, ad īferiās,

ut tē postrēmō dōnārem mūnere mortis

et mūtā nēquīquam adloquerer cinerem,

quandoquidem fortūna mihi tētē abstulit ipsum, (5)

heu miser indignē frāter adempte mihi.

Nunc tamen intereā haec, prīscō quae mōre parentum

trādita sunt trīstī mūnere ad īferiās,

accipe frāternō multum mānantia flētū,

atque in perpetuum, frāter, avē atque valē. (10)

## SUMMARY of RULES and USEFUL TIPS

This poem is about the death of Catullus's brother, so it's a good bet that it's an elegy. Indeed, it's elegiac couplet. That means that every other line follows a different metrical pattern (see p. 4 above).

What do you do?

1. It's easiest to determine the long syllables:
2. Many vowels are long by nature. They are already indicated in the poem (—). That will NOT be the case on the AP exam or in most AP textbooks. This is where your years of memorizing long marks on words will pay off (☺).
  - a. except for 1st decl. abl. sing. and 1st conj. imperative singular —a as an ending is always short.
  - b. except for 3rd decl. masc./fem. sing. —e, abl. sing. is always long.
  - c. the last letter of the dative singular is always long.
  - d. singular imperatives in —a, —i, and 2nd conj. —e are always long: amā, audī, tenē.
  - e. one letter prepositions and vowels at the end of prepositions are long: ā, ē, contrā, dē.
  - f. except for neut. pl. —a, which is always \_\_?, nom. and acc. pl. are always long: ae, ās, ī, ōs, ēs, ūs.
  - g. except for 4th neut., which is —ū, acc. sing. is always short.
  - h. the *a*, *o*, or *e* of gen. pl. will always be long: —ārum, —ōrum, —ērum.
  - i. except for 4th decl. —uī and 5th decl. —eī/eī, the second syllable of all two-syllable noun endings is short: —ēbus, —ōrum, —uum, etc.
  - j. except for some 3rd sing. pres. passive system, *a*, *e*, and *i* before *t* will always be short: vocat, monet, audit, BUT vocātur, monētur, audītur.

