

## Dactylic Hexameter Verse

Ancient verse was composed in lines of long or short syllables in different combinations. Dactylic hexameter consists of lines made from six (*hexa*) feet, each foot containing either a long syllable followed by two short syllables (a dactyl: – ˘ ˘) or two long syllables (a spondee: – –). The first four feet may either be dactyls or spondees. The fifth foot is normally (but not always) a dactyl. The sixth foot is an *anceps*, i.e., either a long-long (– –) or long-short (– ˘).

A line of dactylic hexameter will follow this pattern:

– ˘ ˘ / – ˘ ˘ / – ˘ ˘ / – ˘ ˘ / – ˘ ˘ / – ˘

### I. Quantity Determined by Nature.

Each foot of poetry thus consists of long and/or short syllables. If the syllable contains a short vowel or a long vowel, its quantity is said to be determined by its “nature” — it is short or long simply because it contains a short or long syllable. Thus:

1. A short syllable contains a short quantity vowel.
2. A long syllable contains a long quantity vowel
3. A long syllable may also contain a diphthong.

Here are some general rules to assist in determining the nature of syllables:

- A final *-o*, *-i*, or *-u* is usually long by nature.  
**But:** the final *-i* in *tibi* and *mihi* may be either short or long as the meter requires. (The first *-i-* in both words is always short.)
- A final *-as*, *-es*, or *-os* is usually long by nature.
- A final *-a* or *-is* is often short by nature.  
**But:** *-a* in the first declension ablative singular is always long, as is *-is* in the first and second declensions ablative / dative plural.
- A final *-e* is usually short by nature.  
**But:** *-e* in the fifth declension ablative singular and *-e* on adverbs formed from second declension adjectives are long by nature.
- A final *-us* is usually short by nature.  
**But:** fourth declension genitive singular, and nominative / accusative plural (but not fourth declension nominative singular) are long by nature.
- A final *-am*, *-em*, or *-um* is always short by nature.

## II. Quantity Determined by Position.

A vowel is considered long by position when directly followed by two consonants, whether in the same word or the beginning the next word.

Example 1: in the word *urbs*, the *u*, although short by nature, is long by position because it is followed by two consonants.

Example 2: in the phrase *puella stat* the *-a* of *puella*, although short by nature, is long because it is followed by two consonants. Similarly, the *-e* is also long by position.

This rule is not absolute and some consonant combinations (*-cr*, *-pr*, and *-tr*) will not always create a preceding long vowel.

The consonant *-h-* is not usually considered a full consonant, and will not normally lengthen a preceding vowel. For instance, in the phrase *tenet haec* the syllable *-et* in *tenet* is short, not long.

The consonants *-x-* and *-z-* will lengthen a preceding vowel, since they are actually double consonants (*-ks-* and *-ds-*, respectively).

The common combination *-qu-* will never lengthen a preceding vowel. Also, the *-u* is never long.

Remember that *-i-* in Latin is sometimes a consonant.

## III. Elision and Hiatus.

Elision is the omission of certain syllables in scansion. It has two basic rules:

1. A final syllable ending in a vowel may be omitted before a word beginning with a vowel (or an *h-*).

Thus in *nauta est* the final *-a* is elided or "knocked out," leaving two syllables:  
*naut est.*

**N.B.** The syllable *may or may not* be omitted. The term for deliberate avoidance of elision is called hiatus.

2. A final syllable ending in the letter *-m* may be omitted from the meter before a word beginning with a vowel (or an *h-*).

Thus, *nautam esse* becomes *naut esse.*