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: – ¯ˇ) 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 aniceps, i.e., either a long-long (– –) or long-short (– ¯ˇ).

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.*