

# Introduction to Meter & Scansion

# Meter & Dactylic Hexameter

- all Latin poetry was written in meter, or a particular rhythm determined by the combination of long and short syllables in a line of poetry
- meter is used to convey meaning and add effect to poetry
- there are many popular meters used by the ancient poets
- the epic poets wrote in a meter called **dactylic hexameter**, so-called because it is...
  - made up of six feet (*hexa* = six)
  - primarily consist of dactyls, a measure of meter consisting of the vowel pattern long-short-short ( – u u )

# Scanning Dactylic Hexameters

- dactylic hexameter verses all consist of SIX feet
- the first four feet may be dactyls ( – u u ) or spondees ( – – ) in any combination
  - pace is quicker with dactylic lines, slower with spondeic
- the fifth foot is always a dactyl ( – u u )
- the sixth foot is either be a spondee ( – – ) or trochee ( – u ) [you can scan the sixth foot “ – x “]
- divisions between feet are marked with a straight line ( | )

so, a dactylic hexameter line scanned looks like this:

– UU | – UU | – UU | – UU | – UU | – U

# Determining Vowel Quantities

- to scan dactylic hexameters, *you will need to figure out the quantity (long or short) of every syllable in the line*
- quantity of the syllable is determined by the vowel(s) in that syllable
- **the syllable scans long ( – )...**
  1. **if it's long by nature**: e.g. –ā in 1<sup>st</sup> decl. abl. sg., –ī in 3<sup>rd</sup> PP
  2. **if it's long by position**: if it precedes two or more consonants
    - note that consonantal i (*Trōia*), **x**, and **z** all count as 2 consonants
    - digraphs (2 letter combinations that form a single sound) count as single consonants – **ch, ph, th, qu, gu**, and sometimes **su**
    - **h** is silent and does not affect a preceding vowel's quantity

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  3. **if it's a diphthong** (two vowels written together that produce a single sound):
    - **AE** (saepe), **AU** (aurum), **EI** (deinde), **EU** (seu), **OE** (moenia), **UI** (cui, huius)
    - note: not all such vowel combinations are diphthongs (e.g. fuit, senatui, etc.)
- **all syllables/vowels that do not scan long are considered short**

# Contributing Factors 1: Liquid Letters

- when the consonants **P, B, T, K, D, C, G, Q** are followed by the letters **L** or **R**, the preceding vowel may be either long or short depending on the needs of the meter

– Peanut

– Butter

– Tastes

– Krazy

– Delicious

– Cuz (of)

– Good

– Quality

e.g.:

- PATTREM → may scan either PĀTRĚM or PĚTRĚM

# Contributing Factors 2: Elision & Hiatus

- elision is the omission of a sound or syllable when speaking; this occurs in poetry when two vowels in different words come up against one another
- **Elision occurs if...**
  1. **one word ends in a vowel or diphthong and the next begins with a vowel**; drop the initial vowel/diphthong (tempore in = temporin; agricolae adiuvant = agricoladiuvant)
  2. **one word ends with a vowel or diphthong and the next one begins with H**; drop the initial vowel/diphthong (atque hīc = atquīc)
  3. **one word ends in –UM, –AM, or –EM and the next word begins with a vowel**; drop the –\_M syllable (quem ab = quab)

***\*Note that the syllable always scans according to the SECOND vowel\****

**\*\*Sometimes in such cases, elision will not occur; this is called HIATUS (the deliberate avoidance of elision)\*\***

# Strategies for Scanning

## **1. Identify all elisions first and mark them:**

1. slash out elided syllable ( / )
2. join the two words together ( \_ )

## **2. Start at the end of the line:**

1. the 6<sup>th</sup> foot is always 2 syllables ( - u, - -, - x )
2. the 5<sup>th</sup> foot is always a dactyl ( - u u )

## **3. Go back to the beginning and start scanning the remaining four feet**

1. Remember that the first foot will always be long ( - )
2. Make sure you end up with SIX total feet

## **4. Read the line aloud, stressing the long syllables so that you can hear the effect of the meter**



## Try It Out

**Write out & scan the following lines:**

**monstrum horrendum informe ingens cui lumen ademptum**

**unde hominum genus et pecudes; unde imber et ignes**

**per tot ducta viros antiqua ab origine gentis**