

## Rules for Analyzing the Latin Dactylic Hexameter


The dactylic hexameter is the meter of Vergil's *Aeneid*. A dactyl is a poetic foot consisting of a long followed by two shorts (– ∪ ∪). A long was pronounced at twice the length of a short. Thus one could express a dactyl musically as a quarter and two eighth notes. The effect of repeated dactyls was supposed to be similar to a man on horseback. Hexameter indicates that six feet comprise each line of poetry. These are traditionally separated by a frontslash.

A dactyl may be replaced by a spondee, a foot consisting of two longs (– –). It regularly does so in the last foot, so most Vergilian lines end with a dactyl and a spondee, a rhythm found in the words “straw-ber-ry short-cake” (– ∪ ∪ / – –). Spondees are common in all feet except the fifth, a rarity which marks the line as “spondaic”. The last beat of a line can sometimes violate the rules and be short; its quantity is called “uncertain” *anceps*, and is marked with an “X”. A basic line of dactylic hexameter might appear as follows:

– ∪ ∪ / – ∪ ∪ / – ∪ ∪ / – ∪ ∪ / – ∪ ∪ / – X

The rules of syllable quantity are the same as those you have been learning since the first day of Latin: closed syllables (end in a consonant) and open syllables that end in a long vowel or diphthong are long; only open syllables that end in a short vowel are short. Approach a line of poetry from the end and work backwards. There are two exceptions to the syllabification rules: 1) any combination of consonants that can begin a Latin word may be split or left together as the meter demands; and 2) the presence of “h” is disregarded. A word beginning with “h” is pronounced as if beginning with a vowel. Metrical analysis of a line is called “scansion”. As for pronunciation, do not try to map the meter onto the words. Simply pronounce each word with its usual accent and let the rhythm take care of itself.

There are rules of liaison, elision and prodelision, however, which affect scansion and pronunciation. Consider a line of poetry as **one long string of letters**; i.e., **ignore word-boundaries**. These rules apply only to words beginning with vowels, so when you approach a line for pronunciation, find the words that begin with vowels; one of the following must apply:

- Liaison* Before a word beginning with a vowel, a consonant at the end of the previous word will carry over: *primus ab oris* is syllabified “pri | mu | sa | bo | ris”.
- Elision* Before a word beginning with a vowel, a vowel or vowel + *m* at the end of the previous word will drop. *multum ille et* is syllabified “mul | til | let” (the *-um* of *multum*, and the *-e* on the end of *ille* elide before the next word). Violation of this rule is rare and is called *hiatus*. Elision is marked by a curved line placed below the text. *multum ille et*  

- Prodelision* Before *es* and *est*, 2S and 3S of *sum*, *esse*, if the previous word ends in a vowel or vowel + *m*, the initial *-e* will elide from *es* or *est*. *multum est* is syllabified “mul | tumst”; and *hora est* is syllabified “ho | rast”.

There are two final principles of metrical analysis that we will study, caesura and diaeresis.

A diaeresis (a dividing of the line) occurs when a word ending coincides with the end of a foot. This is normal and desirable at the end of the fourth foot (the *bucolic* diaeresis; the “strawberry shortcake” of feet 5-6 is the smooth finish that restores order to the poetic tension built up in feet 1-4). A diaeresis is common but signifying anxiety or trouble in the line at the end of the first foot. . The crucial feet of a dactylic hexameter are 2-4. Diaeresis is dramatic and significant at the end of the second or third feet where it indicates a real crisis in the line with special significance.

A caesura (pause) is the opposite of diaeresis (a word ending occurs in the middle of a foot). One usually speaks of a caesura as a sort of natural pause in the line. It usually occurs in the third foot, or in the second or fourth foot, or both second and fourth. To find a sense pause, look for some sort of grammatical unit to become complete, e.g., the subject and all its modifiers or a dependent clause, or a connector marking transition to some new unit. (Watch for commas; editors are trying to help show the more pronounced pauses at the end of clauses). If the caesura occurs in the middle of a dactyl, after the first beat of the foot (the *ictus*), it is called a “masculine” caesura; after the first short, it is called a “feminine” caesura. These are sometimes used to make a hero seem effeminate or a heroine seem masculine.

Caesura is marked by double vertical lines between the longs and shorts:

—    ˘    ˘ / —    ˘    ˘ / — ||    — / —    — / —    ˘    ˘ / — x  
Ar | ma | vi | rum | que | ca | nō, | Trō | jae | quī | prī | mu | s   a | b   o | rīs

This textbook line pauses right in the middle of the third foot. The grammar pauses here also to begin a dependent clause after completing the main clause; so the caesura reinforces the sense of the grammar. But this pause may sometimes carry a deeper significance. For instance in this line, the head of *Trojae*, coming in the middle of the line and before *qui*, might seem ambiguous were it not for the caesura. And this is the point: though Aeneas is a man of Troy who bears Trojan arms, he has left this world behind him: “from the shores of Troy” - the true head is only *oris* as the caesura shows.

A good example of diaeresis may be seen in l.28 where Juno thinks of the judgment of Paris and how much she despises the Trojans. Her anger is reflected in the disjointed meter:

—    ˘    ˘ || — — ||    — — / —    ˘    ˘ / —    ˘    ˘ / — —  
et | genu | s   in | vī | sum, et | rap | tī | Ga | ny | mē | di | s   hō | nō | rēs

A first foot diaeresis is usually not significant; but one after the second or third foot is. Notice that even though it may not seem to be a diaeresis because consonants carry over from *genus* into the second foot, and from *invisum* into the third, diaeresis is heard and felt to be there because of the elision and also because it is vowels that determine the foot, not consonants. The meter breaks down after the word *invis(um)* “hated” to show that Juno’s hatred still oppresses her mind. The elision is meant to represent the sense of Ganymede’s being “carried off”. Together the diaeresis and elision “portray” in the meter of the line what the sense of the words is trying to suggest. Juno’s hatred of the Trojan race has led to a “rupture” in the course of Aeneas’ destiny to found Rome. Juno has “interrupted” his journey with the storm. The rape of Ganymede (an ancestor of Aeneas’ Trojan line) by the eagle of Jupiter is one of the early causes of her anger. With this elision, we are supposed to “feel” it happen in the rhythm of the line.

These metrical figures then are supposed to make the line “come to life,” “to speak its sense.” Scansion should be a window into interpretation if done correctly.