

The Pronunciation of Classical Latin

Note: the guide here is for native speakers of English. It is not intended for native speakers of Romance languages, for example, whose pronunciation, in parts at least, is much closer than English to the sound of Latin. These students should avoid rediscovering Latin via English and seek a guide in their own language.

Letter sounds

Each of the five vowels has a long and a short version. Long vowels carry macrons (**ā, ē, ī, ō, ū**). You will find macrons marked here, but not in standard texts of Latin literature. A macron does not signal any stress or extra force for the syllable—although it may coincide. (See ‘Stress and quantity in classical Latin verse’ in the document alongside this one: *An Introduction to Latin Verse*).

- a** short ‘a’ sound, between the ‘u’ in *cup* and the ‘a’ in *cap*; as in *ă-ha!*
- ā** long as in *fāther*
- ae** somewhere between *pīne* and *pain*; the latter was the sound in spoken Latin, certainly after the classical period and probably before it¹; scholars cannot entirely agree over the classical sound
- au** as in *house*; in speech tendency towards Latin **ō**
- b** as in English (**bs** and **bt** are pronounced ‘ps’ and ‘pt’)
- c** as in *cat* (not *chair* or *ceiling*)
- ch** like English ‘k’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
- d** as in English
- e** (short) as in *met*
- ē** (long) as in *may*
- ei** can be two syllables, e.g. **de-ī** (*gods*); the diphthong ‘ei’ (i.e. single syllable) as in **deinde** (*next*) is similar to *reign*

¹ ‘classical’ – This broadly includes the first centuries BC and AD, spilling into the first few decades of the 2nd century AD (i.e. from Cicero to Juvenal); the traditional definition is much narrower (Cicero, Caesar, Sallust and at a pinch Livy).

eu	usually two syllables as in meus ; the diphthong ‘ eu ’ (i.e. single syllable) as in heu (<i>alas</i>) is two sounds run together ‘e-oo’
f	as in English, always soft
g	similar to a hard English ‘g’ (never as in <i>George</i>); in certain words less closure ... a fading sound in magister , fugit , ego
gn	at the beginning of a word as ‘n’ (the g is like English ‘k’ in <i>knee</i>); ‘ngn’ in the middle of a word is between <i>hangnail</i> and <i>Bolognese</i>
h	as in English, although there was a tendency to ignore an initial h in speech
i	a short vowel, as in <i>lip</i>
ī	a long vowel, as in <i>keep</i>
i	a consonant (sometimes written as a ‘j’) like English ‘y’. In some words the vowel and consonant would have been vocalised similarly: e.g. mulier (vowel) and etiam (consonant); the consonant-vowel distinction mattered in verse which was regulated by the flow of syllables (the vocalic i in mulier is a syllable by itself, whereas the consonantal i in etiam is not)
l	as in English
m	as in English at the beginning or in the middle of words; a final ‘m’ is a fading sound which should be pronounced with the lips open, as a nasalisation of the preceding vowel
n	as in English, except below
nf	a preceding vowel is always long (īnferō)
ng	as in <i>anger</i> (not <i>hangar</i>)
ns	a preceding vowel is always long (īnsula); the n is nasalised and less solid than an English ‘n’ (closer to <i>instigate</i> than in <i>inspect</i>)
o	as in <i>not</i>
ō	as in <i>note</i> (as pronounced by Scots and Welsh)
oe	as in <i>boil</i> or as a Scotsman might say the name <i>Roy</i>
p	as in English but with quicker completion and less ‘h’
ph	as in ‘p’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
qu	as in <i>quack</i> (not <i>quarter</i>)
r	always trilled with the tip of the tongue
s	as in <i>gas</i> (never voiced as in <i>has</i>)
t	as in English but with quicker completion and less ‘h’
th	as in ‘t’, with a sharper expulsion of breath
u	as in <i>pull</i>
ū	as in <i>pool</i>

- ui** usually two syllables (e.g. **graduī**, **fuī**, etc.); in a few words, a diphthong like French ‘oui’ (e.g. **huic**, **cui**);
- v** consonantal **v** is sometimes written as a **u**; in 1st century BC like an English ‘w’ (Cicero, Catullus, Virgil, etc.); but developed to a ‘v’ sound possibly as early as Ovid (end of 1st century BC).
- x** as in English
- y** short vowel as in French *tu* (becomes closer to ‘i’ towards the end of the period)
- y** long vowel as in French *sur*
- z** as in English

With double-letters extend the sound of the doubled-up consonant

currus, **reddere**, **posse**, **committere**, **supplicium**

For more on pronunciation, quantity, stress, and an introduction to the metres of classical poetry, see the document alongside this one: *An Introduction to Latin Verse*.

Exercise

Say aloud:

agenda	deus	īnsula	mēnsam	recipe
bonus	ego	laudāre	pater	septem
circus	equus	magister	pervāsīt	tempus fugit
deinde	ignis	māter	puellae	virginēs