

# The Pronunciation of Classical Latin

**Note:** unless guided otherwise, say letters as you say them in English. Better still, say them as a speaker of Romance (ex-Latin) languages like French, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian or Spanish might say them. A fluent speaker of these languages is halfway there already.

## Letter sounds

There are six vowels, **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u**, and **y**, which is always a vowel in Latin. Each of these vowels has a long and a short version. Long vowels carry macrons (**ā**, **ē**, **ī**, **ō**, **ū**, **ȳ**). Macrons appear in learning guides and coursebooks, 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 it<sup>1</sup>; 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** usually two syllables, e.g. **de-ī** (*gods*); in a few words a diphthong (single syllable) similar to *rein* as in **deinde** (*next*); the **i** is a consonant in some words (**eius**)

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

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

- ui** usually two syllables (e.g. **graduī, fuī**); in a few words a diphthong, like French *oui*, (e.g. **huic, cui**)
- v** in 1st century BC a ‘w’ sound (Caesar, Catullus, Cicero, Horace, Virgil, etc.), but a ‘v’ sound is traceable in some quarters, possibly as early as Ovid (end of 1<sup>st</sup> century BC), becoming more widespread thereafter; note that **v** is sometimes written as a **u** (**seruus**)
- x** as in English *axe*, not *exact* (‘ks’, not ‘gs’)
- y** short vowel as in French *tu* (becomes closer to ‘i’ towards the end of the classical period)
- ȳ** 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*.

For practice, say aloud:

agenda  
bonus  
circus  
cōnsul  
deinde  
deus  
ego  
equus  
ignis  
īnfirmus  
īnsula  
laudāre  
magister  
māter dīxit  
mēnsam  
pater  
puellae  
recipe  
septem  
uxor Caesaris  
virginēs  
vōx Cicerōnis  
fugit irreparābile tempus