

Latin Pronunciation Demystified

Michael A. Covington
Program in Linguistics
University of Georgia

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Note: Although flattered by frequent requests, the author regrets that he cannot provide Latin translations or recorded pronunciation samples free of charge. These services are of course available for a consulting fee.

1 Introduction

This paper will tell you how to pronounce Latin words and phrases, given only the spelling and the vowel lengths (which you can look up in any Latin dictionary). I am addressing primarily people who are not schooled in Latin but need to pronounce Latin words because of their interest in science, history, or music.

2 Four rivals

The pronunciation of Latin becomes much less puzzling once you realize that there are at least four rival ways of doing it. The pronunciations you hear in biology or astronomy class don't match the ones you learned from your Latin teacher, and guess what? That doesn't mean they're wrong. They just reflect different periods in history.

Table 1 displays the four main methods. The ancient Roman pronunciation wasn't accurately reconstructed until about 1900. Before that, scholars in every European country pronounced Latin as if it were their own language. With English this gave particularly comical results because English pronunciation had undergone drastic changes at the end of the Middle Ages. Here's an example:

<i>Julius Caesar</i>	=	YOO-lee-us KYE-sahr	(reconstructed ancient Roman)
		YOO-lee-us (T)SAY-sahr	(northern Continental Europe)
		YOO-lee-us CHAY-sahr	("Church Latin" in Italy)
		JOO-lee-us SEE-zer	("English method")

Today, we still use the English Method to pronounce historical and mythological names in English context. The constellation Orion is called O'Ryan, not o-REE-on, and Caesar is called SEE-zer.

the accented syllable is 2 if it contains a long vowel or diphthong, or ends in a consonant, and is otherwise 3.

The only way to find out if a vowel is long is to look in a dictionary. The lengths of vowels have been preserved since ancient times because Latin poetry depends on them, but outside of dictionaries, very few Latin writers mark the lengths. The ancient Romans sometimes marked a vowel long by writing it extra large.

In Greek words borrowed into Latin, $\eta = \bar{e}$, $\epsilon = \check{e}$, $\omega = \bar{o}$, $o = \check{o}$, and for the other vowels, you may have to look in a Greek dictionary.

Diphthongs are double vowels (**ae**, **oe**, etc.).

What about syllables that end in consonants? The rules are:

- When dividing a word into syllables, try to make syllables *begin* with consonants (thus **spe-cu-lum**, not **spec-ul-um**).
- Break up double consonants and other groups of consonants: **an-nus**, **rap-tus**.
- Nonetheless, do not break up **ng**, **qu**, **pr**, **tr**, **cr**, **chr**, **br**, **dr**, **gr**, **pl**, **cl**, **bl**, or **gl**.
This rule tended to confuse even the Romans; thus in late classical times **te-ne-brae** changed to **te-neb-rae**, moving the accent from the first to the second syllable.
- Treat **ph th ch** as single letters.
- Treat **x** as two letters because it stands for *ks*.

5 About the alphabet

In classical Latin, the vowels **i** and **u** can be pronounced non-syllabically as consonants. For example, **uia** was not “oo-ee-ah” but rather “wee-ah” and is nowadays written **via**.

Except for a few purists, all Latinists today write **v** for consonantal **u**. This would have puzzled a Roman, who considered U and V to be the same letter.

After classical times, Latin **v** came to be pronounced like English *v*, losing its phonetic resemblance to **u**.

Latin dictionaries and textbooks often write consonantal **i** as **j**, but editions of the classics usually do not. Thus you will find *Julius* in the dictionary but *Iulius* in a classical text.

The letter **w** did not exist in Latin. In northern Europe, beginning in the Middle Ages, scribes sometimes wrote **w** or **vv** to represent the sound of English *w* in non-Latin names.

6 Accent marks

In Latin dictionaries, long vowels are marked $\bar{\quad}$ and short vowels are sometimes marked $\check{\quad}$ but are more often unmarked.

The dieresis (¨) means that two adjacent vowels do not form a diphthong; instead they are separate syllables. Thus Horace wanted to write a poem that was *aere perennius* (“more lasting than bronze”) and not merely *aëre perennius* (*a-e-re perennius*, “more lasting than air”).

Church Latin books often mark the accented syllable with ´, as in *Dóminus vobíscum* (“The Lord be with you,” *Dominus vōbīscum* to a classicist).

Renaissance printed books often have a variety of accent marks, especially ^ for a significant long vowel (e.g., *sub rosâ*).

-FINIS-

Table 1: Four rival ways of pronouncing Latin.

Letter	Reconstructed Ancient Pronunciation	Northern Continental Pronunciation (recommended for scientific use)	Southern Continental Pronunciation ("Church Latin")	English Method (ancient names in English context)
Vowels				
ā	As in <i>father</i>			As in <i>plate</i>
ǎ	As in <i>about</i>			As in <i>cat</i> (when accented) or <i>about</i> (unaccented)
ē	Like <i>a</i> in <i>plate</i>			As in <i>complete</i>
ĕ	As in <i>pet</i>			As in <i>pet</i>
ī	As in <i>machine</i>			As in <i>dine</i>
ĭ	As in <i>pit</i>			
o	As in <i>home</i>			
ō	As in British (not American) <i>not</i> (similar to ō but less prolonged)			
u	As in <i>rule</i>			As in <i>duty</i>
ŭ	As in <i>put</i>			
ȳ	Like German long <i>ū</i> (less strictly, like Latin ī)		Like Latin ī	
ȳ̆	Like German short <i>ū</i> (less strictly, like Latin ī)		Like Latin ī	
Diphthongs				
ae	Like <i>ai</i> in <i>aisle</i>		Like Latin ē	
oe	Like <i>oi</i> in <i>coil</i>		Like Latin ē	
ei	Like <i>ey</i> in <i>hey</i>			Like <i>i</i> in <i>kite</i>
ui	Like <i>ooey</i> in <i>goeey</i>			Like <i>i</i> in <i>kite</i>
au	Like <i>ou</i> in <i>about</i>			Like <i>aw</i> in <i>law</i>
eu	Approximately like <i>eu</i> in <i>feud</i> (more strictly, like ē ŭ run together)			Like <i>eu</i> in <i>feud</i>
ii	Not a diphthong; this is simply two i 's in succession, forming two syllables. In biological names like <i>Ziphiidae</i> , both i 's are short. In <i>-ū</i> as gen. sg. or nom. pl. of <i>-ius</i> (e.g. <i>Nelsonū</i>), the first i is short and the second is long.			
Consonants				
b, d, f, h, k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z	As in English			
c before i, e, y, ae, oe	Like k	Like s (in Germany, like ts)	Like <i>ch</i> in <i>church</i>	Like s
c elsewhere	Like k			
g before i, e, y, ae, oe	As in <i>goose</i>		As in <i>gem</i>	
g elsewhere	As in <i>goose</i>			
j (consonantal i)	Like <i>y</i> in <i>yet</i>			As in English
r	Always fully pronounced, as in Scotland or midwestern America (not absorbed into preceding vowel as in British English)			As in English
s	Always as in <i>sit</i> (not as in <i>rose</i>)		As in <i>sit</i> (as in <i>rose</i> when between vowels)	As in <i>sit</i> (like <i>z</i> in the suffix -ēs)
v (consonantal u)	Like <i>w</i> in <i>wet</i>	Like <i>v</i> in <i>very</i>		
ch	Like k , more emphatic		Like k	
ph	Like p , more emphatic (postclassically, like f)		Like f	
th	Like t , more emphatic (postclassically, like <i>th</i> in <i>thin</i>)		Like t	
gn after a vowel	Like <i>ngn</i> in <i>hangnail</i>	Like <i>gn</i> in <i>magnify</i>	Like <i>ny</i> in <i>canyon</i>	Like <i>gn</i> in <i>magnify</i>
ti between vowels	Like <i>tzy</i> in <i>ritzy</i> (this is postclassical and usage varies)			Like English <i>sh</i>

The Mass:

Sanctus (Holy, Holy)

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dóminus Deus Sábaoth.

sahnk-toos Dome-ee-noose Day-oose Sah-bah-oath

Pleni sunt coeli et terra Gloria tua

pleh-nee soont choi-lee eht- teh-rah gloria too-ah

Hosanna in excélsis

hoe-zahn-nah ehn ehx-shell-seez

Benedictus que venit in nomine Domini

Behn-nee-deek-toos kweh veh-neet een nohm-een-neh Doe-meen-ee

Hosanna in excélsis

hoe-zahn-nah ehn ehx-shell-seez

Lamb of God (Anus Dei)

Angnus Dei, qui tollis peccáta mundi

ahh-noose Day-ee kwee tohl-ees pek-kah-tah moon-dee

miserre nobis

meez-ehr-ray noh-beez

dona nobis pacem

doe-nah noe-beez pah-chem