

In reading Latin poetry one soon becomes familiar with the principles of its quantitative system, where syllables are either long or short and are arranged in patterns with units called feet. One favourite pattern was the hexameter, made up of six feet which are sometimes spondees, or two long syllables, and sometimes dactyls, or a long followed by two shorts. Poets found that the ears and minds of their hearers responded more favourably when there was a regular pattern diversified by variation. A series of lines with only spondees would seem intolerably slow and heavy, while an unbroken stretch of dactyls would degenerate into mechanical sing song. The pattern towards the end of hexameter lines tended to become fixed, with most of the variations in the first four feet. Since there is an almost inevitable pause at the end of a line, even though the idea may be continued in the next line, the last syllable was considered long, and this requires a spondee at the final foot. To end a line with two spondees, however, seemed too much, except for special purposes, and this was generally avoided. In the great majority of cases, then, hexameter lines end with a dactyl followed by a spondee. The first four feet may be any combination of dactyls and spondees, although usually not all one or the other.

How can one best learn to recognise and to read a passage in hexameters? As with swimming or bike-riding, skill comes only with practice. Students are generally advised to start by marking long and short syllables and dividing them into feet. This is indeed helpful as long as one does not stop here. The aim of the exercise is of course the reading and hearing of the rhythmic patterns. There is no point in marking quantities if one does not go on to read and hear. It may be argued that most students could learn faster and better if they simply listened to a skilled reader, without being distracted by marking of syllables, and then spent some time reading aloud with their guide. The number of possible patterns is large but limited, and the ear soon learns to recognise what patterns are possible. A word like MONEBAS is not hard for even a relative beginner to spot as being a short syllable followed by two longs. That series of syllables, in a hexameter verse, determines three more syllables. The initial short must be the end of a dactyl, the two longs must be a spondee, and the following syllable must then be a long. Thus  $U - -$  leads necessarily to  $- U U - - -$ . In the same way a pattern like that of FIGURA determines or suggests adjoining syllables. The quantities given, short, long, short, can only fit a pattern  $- UU - UU -$ ; in other words the three given syllables determine four others as well-- unless the poet makes the final vowel long, by using it in an ablative construction or starting the next word with two consonants.

While the ear can be trained to recognise patterns from relatively few clues, a process of analysis may still be needed at times. Here are some questions to test your analytic skills:

HEXAMETER PUZZLES

1. Can a hexameter line start with POETIS? Can one end with it?
2. If the second syllable in a hexameter line is short, what is the fourth?
3. Can INGENS in hexameters have short syllables both before and after it?
4. Can the final syllable of CONSTANTINOPOLIS be short in a hexameter line?
5. In hexameters what two syllables must precede FACETIA? What must follow it?
6. Can AUSTERITATIS be used in hexameters?
7. Under what circumstances can AUSONIA be used in hexameters?
8. What is the complete scansion of a regular hexameter line of sixteen syllables, if the third is short and the fifth is long?