

The Latin Pronunciation Guide

Latin is a wonderful language that, much like its descendents, has a consistent pronunciation scheme within its spelling – unlike English. Once the rules are known and understood, it is easy for someone unfamiliar with the language to pronounce the written words. Of course, modern pronunciations of Latin noticeably differ from the classical ones (e.g. the biologic term *coelum*); so walking into your law or biology course and demanding certain pronunciations will only get you stares. Still, it is nice knowing how to say the names of your favorite units the way Caesar or Scipio Africanus would. Hence this guide.

The rules below are geared toward English speakers due to the vagaries of their language. However, non-English speakers should be able to pick up on these rules easily. Also, this will be a simplified version of the rules – enough to get you by in the mod. And, of course, if you have any questions, please ask in our fora.

Vowels and Diphthongs

Vowels

Latin has six written vowels. These are the traditional A, E, I, O, and U. The letter Y was added to the alphabet to represent the Greek upsilon when incorporating Greek names or words into Latin. Each of these vowels has a long and a short pronunciation. The long pronunciation is demarcated by a macron (¯) above the vowel.

Long:

ā – as in *father*

ē – as *they* or *a* in *date*

ī – as in *machine* or *-ee-* in *seen*

ō – as in *holy* or *clover*

ū – as in *rude* or *oo* in *boot* and *pool*

y – between **u** and **i** as in the French *tu* or the German *über*

Short:

a – as in *idea* or *Dinah* or *hat*

e – as in *net* or *pet*

i – as in *sit* or *pin*

o – as in *obey* or *off* or *pot*

u – as in *put*

Diphthongs

There are six diphthongs in Latin. Diphthongs are combinations of two vowel sounds together in one syllable. By their nature, they are long vowels. In archaic Latin, you would often see diphthongs written similar to Greek with **i** instead of the familiar **e**. This changed early on due to the characteristics that a diphthong with an **i** had as outlined in the section on consonants below.

ae – as *ai* in *aisle* or *i* in *high*

au – like *ow* in *now* or as in *ou* in *house*

ei – as in *eight* or *reign*

eu – like *eh'oo* and pronounced rapidly; actually a rare diphthong in Latin and a sound not found in English; should not be confused with many words ending in *-eus* in the nominative.

oe – like *oi* in *oil* and *coin* or *oy* in *boy*

ui – as *oo'ee* or English *goeey* or Spanish *muy*

Consonants

The consonants can be divided up into several different classifications depending on how they are

formed. Unless you're learning the language though, this does not particularly matter. What follows is just a quick run-down of the consonants where there are differences, but which are all familiar sounds to us in English.

- b** – generally pronounced as we know it and never silent; **bs** and **bt** were pronounced similar to *ps* and *pt*
- c** – always hard as in *can* and never soft as in *city*
- g** – always hard as in *get* and never soft as in *gem*; when followed by **u** and another vowel, it would function as a soft **q** as in Latin *sanguinarius* (san-gui-na'-ri-us) having the value of *gw*
- h** – an aspirated sound similar to English
- i** – although generally thought of as a vowel, it also acted in a consonantal role similar to the *y* in the English *young*. This would be seen often in the beginning of words when followed by a vowel. In the Middle Ages this became the English letter *j*. Hence, the Latin name Julius was originally written as **Iulius**. Furthermore, **i** also separates syllables while acting as a diphthong. An example is the city **Troia** pronounced *Troy-ya*.
- m** – pronounced as in English with the lips closed
- q** – as in English and always followed by a consonantal **u** and having the value of *kw*
- r** – trilled or rolled as it is in Romance languages
- s** – pronounced as in *see* or *sea* or *mouse* and not roughly as in *ease*
- t** – as in *tired* or *top* and never as an *sh* or *ch* as in *nation* or *mention*
- v/u** – the same with **i**, both a consonant and a vowel. The Romans only had the letter **v**, but in modern texts you will find written a **v** for the consonant and **u** for the vowel. Similar to the rules for **i**, **v** was pronounced as the modern English *w*. Although in the official names for Roman units, we will write using only **v**, for the pronunciations we will differentiate for you.
- x** – had the sound of *ks* as in *axle* or *fox* and not *gz* and in *exert* nor the *z* sound of *xylophone*
- ch** – pronounced as the *ch* in Scottish *loch* and not as in *church*
- ph** – pronounced as in English *uphill* rather than the *f* sound in *philosophy*
- th** – pronounced as in *hot house* instead of *the* or *they*, but in one syllable

Double consonants were always pronounced and often split syllables. Each vowel in a word would form a syllable as long as it wasn't part of a diphthong. There are exceptions to this rule wherein consonants are followed by a “liquid” (**l** and **r**) and these would run together (eg. English *tree* is an example of a liquid).

Accent

Latin uses a stress accent with what might have been a slight raise in pitch on the accented syllable. In a word, there are ultimate (last), penultimate (second to last), and ante-penultimate syllables. In words of two syllables, the penultimate syllable is stressed (eg. le'vēs). In words of three or more syllables, the ante-penultimate is stressed (eg. prīn'ci-pēs) unless the penultimate is long (eg. rō-mā'nī).