

Classical Latin Pronunciation

Table of Contents

- [1. Syllables](#)
 - [1.1. Dividing Words into Syllables](#)
 - [1.2. Stress](#)
- [2. Vowels](#)
 - [2.1. Plain Vowels](#)
 - [2.2. Sonus Medius](#)
 - [2.3. Diphthongs](#)
 - [2.4. Elision](#)
- [3. Consonants](#)
 - [3.1. Unvoiced Plosives](#)
 - [3.2. Voiced Plosives](#)
 - [3.3. Fricatives](#)
 - [3.4. Nasals](#)
 - [3.4.1. Final M](#)
 - [3.4.2. N Before a Fricative](#)
 - [3.5. Liquids](#)
 - [3.5.1. R](#)
 - [3.5.2. L](#)
 - [3.6. Semivowels](#)
 - [3.7. Voicing Assimilation](#)

1. Syllables

The Latin syllable is made up of an onset, a nucleus and a coda. The onset and coda can contain consonants, and the nucleus (the only mandatory part) contains vowels or diphthongs. Syllables can be long or short;

- A syllable is short if its coda is empty (i.e. ends in a vowel) and its nucleus is short
- A syllable is long if:
 - Its nucleus is long (long vowel or diphthongs)
 - **or** Its coda is not empty (ends in a consonant)

1.1. Dividing Words into Syllables

The number of syllables in a word in isolation is the number of vowels and diphthongs. This is the golden rule of Latin syllables.

- When a single consonant is intervocalic, it joins the onset of the second syllable. **Rōmānus** is Rō-mā-nus.
- When two consonants occur in a row, the first joins the coda of the first syllable, and the second joins the onset of the second syllable. **Optimus** is Op-ti-mus. **UNLESS:**
 - The consonant pair is a stop followed by a liquid. In this case, both join the onset of the second syllable. **Utrum** is U-trum. Note that this does not always happen, especially in poetry.
- When more than two consonants are found together, the first syllable is going to be long anyway.

1.2. Stress

Classical Latin follows a relatively simple stress rule with few exceptions. To stress a word, one must perform the following procedure:

- Divide the word up into syllables.
- Examine the penultimate syllable;
- If it is long, stress it.
- If it is short:
 - And the word has no enclitics, stress the antepenultimate.
 - And the word has enclitic(s), repeat the entire process with the enclitics removed.

The most common exception to this stress rule is words that end with *c* — some of them used to have a final *e* after the stress rule was introduced, which was later lost. One should shift the whole stress pattern forward for such words: *illīc* < *illīce*, so we stress *līc*.

2. Vowels

Latin vowels can be considered *long* or *short*. Long vowels will typically take about twice as long as short vowels to pronounce. The distinction between long and short vowels is a *phonemic* one - meaning it is not dependent on position or stress, and is a fundamental part of the word.

Take for example the phrase *Sōl occidit* and the phrase *Sōl occīdit*. The first one means "the sun sets", and the second means "the sun kills".

In modern Latin orthography, short vowels are usually not indicated (though dictionaries might mark them with a breve - *ă*) and long vowels are marked by the *macron* symbol (Greek for "long") - *ā*. In Classical Roman times, long vowels were usually marked by the *apex* (an acute-like accent) on *a*, *e*, *o* and *u*, and on *i* using a taller letter "I Longa" — or not marked at all.

2.1. Plain Vowels

Classical Latin has five or six native vowel qualities, and a borrowed Greek vowel in educated speech. The most probable model for vowel qualities is the one proposed by Andrea Calabrese in 2003:

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i [i]	(i, u [i~u])	u [u]
Mid	e [ɛ]		o [ɔ]
Open		a [ä]	

Long and short vowels do not differ in quality — only in length.

Latin has one vowel borrowed from Greek: *y* [y], a close front rounded vowel (though it might be slightly retracted).

2.2. Sonus Medius

Classical Latin had an intermediate vowel sound, resulting from Old Latin vowel reduction due to stress. It can appear in unstressed short syllables before a labial consonant (*p*, *b*, *m*, *f*), and most likely was realized as

[i] or [u]. The sound later became fronted, merging with /i/. In some words, however, the older /u/ sound was retained.

For example:

- *optimus*: ['ɔptumus] -> ['ɔptumus] -> ['ɔptimus] -> ['ɔptimus]
- *documentum*: ['dɔcumentū:] -> ['dɔcumentū:] Classical stress -> [dɔcū'mentū:] -> [dɔci'mentū:] reverting -> [dɔcu'mentū:]

Emperor Claudius may have created a new letter to represent this sound — 𐌀𐌀 — but the sound disappeared shortly after and it's possible that the letter may not have represented this sound at all.

2.3. Diphthongs

Most Latin diphthongs originated in a combination of plain vowels, but they might differ in quality in the Classical period. Phonemic diphthongs are always long.

	Mid	Close Front	Close Back
Front		ei [eᶥ]	eu [eᶤ]
Central	ae [äᶤ]		au [äᶤ]
Back	oe [oᶤ]	ui [ui]	(uncommon)

Note that **when these digraphs seem to appear in writing, they don't always represent the corresponding diphthong**. For example, the combination of the prefix *ne-* with the adjective *uter* produces *neuter*, which does *not* start with a diphthong.

2.4. Elision

Two subsequent vowels at word boundary are commonly elided in speech — i.e. their sounds are combined (or sometimes the first is completely omitted) into one syllable. The resulting (usually) diphthong takes the length of the second vowel. This is not a phonemic process.

In some very common short words with an initial vowel, that vowel can disappear entirely in elision. Consider *est*, the third-person present indicative copula: it can be commonly found in inscriptions as a suffix-like *-st*. In modern orthography we don't write these elisions out (except perhaps in poetry) — we retain the phonemes. Although /'bɔ.num est/ will be actually realized as ['bɔnũst] (['bɔnũ:st] ?) ("bonu'st"), we still write *bonum est*.

3. Consonants

The general native **phonemic** inventory of Latin is as so (no allophones included!):

	Labial	Labiodental	Dento-Alveolar	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p /p/, b /b/		t /t/, d /d/			c k /k/, g /g/, qu /kʷ/, gu /gʷ/ (rare)	

	Labial	Labiodental	Dento-Alveolar	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Fricative		f /f/		s /s/ (sibilant)			h /h/
Nasal	m /m/		n /n/				
Trill				r /r/			
Approximant				l /l/ (lateral)	j i /j/	v /w/	

Consonant phonemes borrowed from Greek:

	Labial	Dento-Alveolar	Alveolar	Velar
Plosive	ph /p ^h /	th /t ^h /		ch /k ^h /
Fricative			z /z/	
Trill			rh /r̥/	

A full allophonic chart including Greek borrowings looks like this:

	Labial	Labiodental	Dento-Alveolar	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p, b, p ^h		t̪, d̪, t ^h			k, k, k ^w , g ^w , k ^h	
Fricative		f, v?		s, z			h
Nasal	m	ɱ	ɳ			ŋ	
Trill				r, r̥			
Approximant				l, l̥	j	w	

3.1. Unvoiced Plosives

Latin has four unvoiced plosive phonemes. They are realized as:

- p [p]
- t [t̪] - Dento-alveolar, like Italian or Spanish.
- c or k [k]
- qu [k^w]

The labialized /k^w/ palatalizes before front vowels to [k^u]. ? The stops are not aspirated, though Latin has no native aspirated plosives so mild aspiration could be going on in informal speech.

Aspirated stops borrowed from Greek:

- ph [p^h]
- th [t̪^h] - Dento-alveolar.
- ch [k^h]

3.2. Voiced Plosives

Latin has three or four voice plosive phonemes. They are realized as:

- b [b]
- d [d̪] - Dento-alveolar, like Italian or Spanish.
- g [g]
- gu [gʷ] - Only occurs sometimes after [ŋ]. Phonemicity disputed.

The labialized velar stop palatalizes before front vowels to [gʲ]. ?

3.3. Fricatives

Latin has two native fricatives:

- f [f]
- s [s̠] - Retracted. Like Castilian Spanish, Dutch, Finnish and Greek (of all periods).

These are never voiced intervocallically, but Latin has one borrowed fricative from Greek:

- z [z̠] - Retracted. Like Greek (of all periods).

The /z/ phoneme is always doubled in intervocalic position.

3.4. Nasals

Latin has two nasal phonemes with a range of allophones:

- m [m]
- n [n̪] - Dento-alveolar, like Italian or Spanish.

Nasals usually assimilate before Bilabial, Labiodental, Dento-alveolar and Velar consonants to [m], [m̪], [n̪] and [ŋ] respectively. [ŋ] is usually written with n and [m̪] with m, so if you see n before a labial consonant or m before a velar or alveolar consonant, it's probably for good reason (numquam ['numkʷã̃]).

3.4.1. Final M

Final M is not truly a consonant. It is more accurate to refer to it as a "final nasal", but it is written with the letter m so it is referred to like that. If the next word begins with a bilabial, labiodental, dento-alveolar or velar consonant final m assimilates and becomes one of the allophones mentioned above.

In all other cases however, final M nasalizes the preceding vowel and makes it long. It can therefore undergo elision if the next word begins with a vowel: *imperiūm* [im'periũ:].

3.4.2. N Before a Fricative

N before [f] or [s̠] nasalizes the preceding vowel and makes it long (lengthening also indicated in the orthography). The compound con- + *sōlor* produces *cōnsōlor* (as opposed to **consōlor*).

3.5. Liquids

Latin has two liquid phonemes:

- r [r]
- l [l]

3.5.1. R

The main realization of /r/ is an alveolar trill, [r]. Between vowels, however, it is pronounced as a tap [ɾ]. When doubled it is a longer trill [rː]. Borrowed from Greek is a voiceless trill [ɾ̥]. It is written by r h word-initially, and a longer trill r r h when doubled.

3.5.2. L

The main realization of /l/ is an alveolar lateral approximant [l]. It has a velarized "dark L" allophone [ɫ] that occurs before consonants and at the end of a word. Dark L does not occur intervocalically, nor when doubled (according to [this video by Raphael Turriano](#)). ?

3.6. Semivowels

Classical Latin has two semivowel phonemes:

- j i [j]
- v [w]

Minimal pairs of vocalic [i] and consonantal [j] do not exist (and it is because of this that they are usually not distinguished outside ecclesiastical texts), but there is most definitely a difference in pronunciation.

Consonantal [j] occurs:

- Word-initially before a vowel (j am [jãː])
- In intervocalic position (e j us ['ejjuː]), where it is always geminated.

Note that vocalic [i] can also occur in these position, as in the common praenōmen Gā i us ['gä:iuː].

Minimal pairs of vocalic [u] and consonantal [w] do occur, and so they are usually distinguished in writing with v for [w] and u for [u]. In Classical times, u and v were not separate letters, so Emperor Claudius created an entirely new letter ɰ to represent [w].

3.7. Voicing Assimilation

Like many modern Romance languages, Classical Latin has regressive voicing assimilation in some cases. This happens when:

- A **plosive** or a **sibilant** (fricative ?) is followed by:
- A **nasal**, a **sibilant**, or a **plosive** of different voicing. (fricative, approximant ?)

This also happens at word boundary.

Examples:

- Urbs /urbs/ realized as [urps]
- Addition of -ne to es results in esne /'es.ne/ realized as ['ɛzɲɛ]

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