Latin Pronunciation Demystified

Michael A. Covington
Program in Linguistics
University of Georgia

Last revised March 9, 2009

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:

Julius Caesar	=	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.

Italian "Church Latin" is widely though not universally used in the Catholic Church and in singing.

I recommend the northern Continental pronunciation for unfamiliar scientific terms, since it resembles many modern languages and is, in fact, the pronunciation used by Copernicus, Kepler, Linnaeus, and other scientific pioneers. Northern Europe is not, of course, perfectly uniform; I

give a compromise between several regional variations. For example, in Germany you will hear **oe** pronounced like German ŏ.

The ancient Roman pronunciation is of course what we use when teaching or seriously speaking Latin. Its biggest peculiarities are that **v** is pronounced like English *w*, and **ae** like English *ai* in *aisle*. These two sounds were already changing at the end of the classical period.

3 Do we know how the Romans pronounced Latin?

Surprisingly, yes. The details of the reconstruction are given in W. Sidney Allen, *Vox Latina* (written in English), Cambridge, 1965. There are several main sources of knowledge:

- The Latin alphabet was meant to be entirely phonetic. Unlike us, the ancient Romans did not inherit their spellings from any earlier language. What you see is what you get.

- Language teaching was big business in Roman times, and ancient Roman grammarians give us surprisingly detailed information about the sounds of the language.

- Languages derived from Latin give us a lot of evidence. In fact, many of the letters of the alphabet are pronounced the same way in French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian. It stands to reason that the original Latin pronunciation has survived.

- Spelling errors made by the ancient Romans are very informative. If two letters are often mixed up, they must sound fairly similar. Likewise, if two letters are never mixed up, we know they sounded different.

  Here's an example. In classical times, the natives had no trouble keeping **ae** distinct from **e**; if they ever misspelled **ae** it came out **ai**. Later on, they started changing **ae** to **e**. That enables us to pinpoint when the sound of **ae** changed.

- Finally, transcriptions into other writing systems, such as Greek and Sanskrit, often pin down the ancient pronunciation of Latin very precisely.

4 Finding the accented syllable

Fortunately, all four systems agree as to the accented (stressed) syllable. It is always the second or third from last. Specifically, if you number the syllables from the end of the word, like this:

$$\underbrace{\text{Tri}}_{4}\ \underbrace{\text{ang}}_{3}\ \underbrace{\text{u}}_{2}\ \underbrace{\text{lum}}_{1}\qquad \underbrace{\text{Aus}}_{3}\ \underbrace{\text{trā}}_{2}\ \underbrace{\text{le}}_{1}$$

("the southern triangle," name of a modern constellation), then

> **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, η = **ē**, ϵ = **ĕ**, ω = **ō**, o = **ŏ**, 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 ˉ and short vowels are sometimes marked ˘ 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 ˆ 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 *father*			As in *plate*
ă	As in *about*			As in *cat* (when accented) or *about* (unaccented)
ē	Like *a* in *plate*			As in *complete*
ĕ	As in *pet*			As in *pet*
ī	As in *machine*			As in *dine*
ĭ	As in *pit*			
ō	As in *home*			
ŏ	As in British (not American) *not* (similar to **ō** but less prolonged)			
ū	As in *rule*			As in *duty*
ŭ	As in *put*			
ȳ	Like German long *ü* (less strictly, like Latin **ī**)		Like Latin **ī**	
y̆	Like German short *ü* (less strictly, like Latin **ĭ**)		Like Latin **ĭ**	
Diphthongs				
ae	Like *ai* in *aisle*	Like Latin **ē**		
oe	Like *oi* in *coil*	Like Latin **ē**		
ei	Like *ey* in *hey*			Like *i* in *kite*
ui	Like *ooey* in *gooey*			Like *i* in *kite*
au	Like *ou* in *about*			Like *aw* in *law*
eu	Approximately like *eu* in *feud* (more strictly, like **ĕ ŭ** run together)			Like *eu* in *feud*
ii	Not a diphthong; this is simply two **i**'s in succession, forming two syllables. In biological names like *Ziphiidae*, both **i**'s are short. In *-ĭī* as gen. sg. or nom. pl. of *-ius* (e.g. *Nelsonii*), 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 *ch* in *church*	Like **s**
c elsewhere	Like **k**			
g before **i**, **e**, **y**, **ae**, **oe**	As in *goose*		As in *gem*	
g elsewhere	As in *goose*			
j (consonantal **i**)	Like *y* in *yet*			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 *sit* (not as in *rose*)			Usually as in *sit* (but like *z* in the suffix **-ēs**)
v (consonantal **u**)	Like *w* in *wet*	Like *v* in *very*		
ch	Like **k**, more emphatic	Like **k**		
ph	Like **p**, more emphatic (postclassically, like **f**)	Like **f**		
th	Like **t**, more emphatic (postclassically, like *th* in *thin*)	Like **t**		As in *thin*
gn after a vowel	Like *ngn* in *hangnail*	Like *gn* in *magnify*	Like *ny* in *canyon*	Like *gn* in *magnify*
ti between vowels	Like *tzy* in *ritzy*			Like English *sh*