

## Word stress in classical Latin

To understand the workings of the Latin stress accent, it is necessary to recognize the difference between long and short syllables.

### Long and short syllables

Like a vowel, a syllable too may be long or short.<sup>1</sup> A long syllable takes roughly twice as long to say as a short one.

A syllable may be long ‘by nature’, i.e. if it has a long vowel (**amāre**) or a diphthong (**saevus**).

A syllable may also be long ‘by position’, even if it contains a short vowel: a vowel followed by two consonants usually makes a syllable long, e.g. **libertus**, **prōvincia**, **puella**.

But this two-consonant rule has exceptions:

- where the second consonant of the two which follow the vowel is **l** or **r**, the syllable may be long or short, e.g. **patrēs** (but double letters, **ll** or **rr**, always make a syllable long)
- **h** has no consonantal value, and **ch**, **ph**, **rh** and **th** are treated as single consonants
- **qu** is treated as a single consonant.

Conversely **x** is treated as two consonants (‘ks’), so any syllable ending -x is long.

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars refer to them as ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ syllables to avoid confusion with long and short vowels; but this has not gained widespread use, perhaps because of the suggestion of weight or emphasis (i.e. stress), which quantity should not imply. Think of length as lingering, or even lazy, and shortness as brief or rapid.

## Stress

A long syllable is not necessarily stressed (though they often are). That depends on the syllable's position in the word. Latin had a stress accent similar to our own: the second last syllable (penultimate) of a word is stressed if it is long

          '          '          '          '  
**amāre habēnās incendunt virumque**

but if the penultimate syllable is short, then the previous (antepenultimate) syllable is stressed

          '          '          '          '          '  
**praemium mittere dominus condidit militēs**

A word of only two syllables should have the first syllable stressed, even if it is a short (e.g. the first syllable of **erat** would carry a light stress, that of **dīvus** would be a little heavier). Some monosyllabic words may carry stress if the sense demands it, e.g. **ī!** (*go!*); but words like **ad**, **est** and **et** carry hardly any stress. Polysyllabic words may have a secondary stress (as in English, e.g. *ínformation*):

(<sup>1</sup>)          '  
con**did**ērunt *they founded*

The pluperfect tense of the same verb is

          '  
con**did**erant (*they had founded*)

On the page the difference between the two is one vowel. But because of the change in quantity, the stress of the pluperfect form moves back a syllable to create a perceptibly different sound. Variations such as this were no doubt important to the spoken language, in which the role of inflexion (word-endings) tended to diminish.

## Practice

*Say aloud:* agenda, amāre, bonus, centum, deinde, deus, equus, fugit, ignis, īnsula, laudāre, māter, mittere, pater, pervāsit, puellae, recipe, vēnī vīdī vīci.