

Latin Pronunciation

Latin is relatively easy to pronounce; the problem is that there are two conventions for pronouncing it. **Church Latin** developed out of Medieval traditions and remains the standard pronunciation in the Roman Catholic church, where it is virtually a living language. **Classical Latin** is the pronunciation (reconstructed by historical linguists in the 19th Century) of educated Romans of the late Republic and Empire periods (circa -300 to +300); it is now the universal standard for the teaching of Latin. We concentrate here on Classical Latin.

Latin had only 10 vowels: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, and /u/, each occurring both long and short. Latin long vowels are often not indicated, but when they are, a **macron** is used to mark them: **ā, ē, ī, ō, ū**; long vowels were the same as short, but were held longer. The Romans used only capital letters; lower-case forms come from Medieval times. The Romans did not distinguish semivowels in writing, so they used **I** for both /i/ and /y/, and **V** for both /u/ and /w/ (there was no voiced labial fricative /v/ in Classical Latin, though one developed in Medieval Latin; modern convention always uses **U** for the vowel /u/). Diphthongs in Classical Latin were similar to English: /oi/ (spelled **OE**), /ai/ (spelled **AE**), and /au/.

Latin had labial, dental, and velar series of consonants, with both voiced and voiceless stops (but only voiceless fricatives), nasals /m/ and /n/, one /r/ and one /l/. The spelling was essentially the same as ours, with the following exceptions: Latin **V**, as noted, is the semivowel /w/; **I** (sometimes spelled **J** in modern transcriptions) can be the semivowel /y/ as well as /i/; **C** is **always** pronounced /k/, **never** /s/; and **X** is **always** pronounced /ks/, **never** /z/. The stress accent was predictable, falling regularly on the next-to-last syllable (the **penult**) if it was **heavy** (i.e. if it contained a long vowel, or ended in a consonant), and otherwise on the syllable before it (the **antepenult**). Thus the conjugation of the verb 'to hear' in the perfect tense was pronounced thus (stressed vowels are boldfaced): /audīwī, audīwistī, audīwit, audīwimus, audīwistis, audīwērunt/. Latin was a syllable-timed language and its poetry depended on patterns of heavy and light syllables. There was no rhyme in classical Latin poetry.

In Church Latin, by contrast, there is no distinction between long and short vowels (so stress is unpredictable, and thus often marked), **AE** and **OE** are both pronounced /e/, **V** is pronounced /v/, **X** between vowels is voiced to /gz/. There is palatalization before the front vowels /e/ and /i/: in this environment **SC** is pronounced /ʃ/, **T** as /ts/, **C** as /tʃ/, and **G** as /dʒ/, but they are /sk/, /t/, /k/, and /g/ elsewhere. This is virtually identical to Modern Italian. Church Latin was less syllable-timed than Classical Latin, and its poetry depended on patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables with rhyme, much like modern English.

Those who are curious might be interested in <http://www.umich.edu/~jlawler/wow/scans/Wow-7.pdf>
Contents of **Miscellaneous materials about Latin** (from my freshman etymology course [A World of Words](#)):

- Exercise: cold translation of a text in modern Italian
- Nicene Creed in Latin
- Quiz on the Nicene Creed
- Quiz on Michigan state motto
- Quiz on Ash Wednesday liturgy
- Exercise: questions to answer
- Exercise: parse and construe the famous 1st sentence in *Bello Gallico*
- 1-page graphic parsing of that sentence
- Morphology problem with Latin *-al/-ar* suffix
- Explanation of how to pronounce Latin, with phonetics
- 1-page summary of Latin verb inflection
- 1-page summary of Latin noun inflection
- 5 pages of Medieval Latin poetry, some translated
- Exercise: list of Latin phrases used in English to look up