

MINIMUS PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Vowels

Vowels can be either short or long. Whether a vowel is short or long can make a difference to the meaning. *Est* means ‘is’, with short e; *ēst* with long e means ‘eats’. The difference between the vowels is roughly like that between ‘Kelly’ and ‘ceilidh’.

The short vowels a, e, i, o, u are pronounced as in English: pat, pet, pit, pot, put. The -us of Minimus is pronounced to rhyme with puss, not with southern English fuss.

The long vowels are pronounced like the short vowels, only twice as long. They approximate to the English sounds in bah, bay, bee, bow (the kind you tie), boo: if you pronounce these vowels with a Yorkshire, Lancashire, Scottish or Welsh accent you will get even closer to the Latin. Do not be confused by the English so-called ‘long’ sounds of A, E, I, U (ay, ee, eye, you), which developed in English in the Middle Ages. English until then preserved the original Latin sounds, which are still the same in most European languages.

In the Minimus Course books, a straight horizontal line over the letter can be used to mark a long vowel – ā ē ī ō ū.

There are two common vowel combinations (diphthongs) in Latin. AE developed from an earlier sound AI, pronounced as in Thailand or the river Kwai. This is the pronunciation used for AE by classicists.

AU was originally pronounced like ow in now, and this is the classical pronunciation.

Less common is the combination OE. This is pronounced classically as in oi in oil, but it later changed to e, which we usually have in corresponding English words. It generally survives only after certain consonants (p, b or m) in a few words like *poena* ‘penalty’ and *oboediens* ‘obedient’, and in Greek borrowings like *oenogarum* ‘fish saucs with wine’.

I before another vowel is pronounced as Y: *Iulius* sounds like ‘Yoolioos’, *maior* ‘bigger’ like ‘mah-yor’. The letter J as in Julius and major is just a written variant of I, extended with a flourish. (J was used for this sound in older Latin printed books, but no longer.)

Vowels before M or (in some circumstances) N were pronounced nasal, as in modern French *bon vin blanc*.

Consonants

The consonants b, d, f, h, k, l, m, n, p, qu, s, t, and x are pronounced exactly as in English.

The letter R should always be pronounced recognisably in Latin, and the English tendency to drop it after a vowel needs to be resisted. Otherwise it would be hard for Minimus to distinguish e.g. between *mors* ‘death’ and *mos* ‘habit’, or between *parco*

‘to spare’ and *pāco* ‘to calm down’. Pronounce with a Scottish accent and all will be well.

Double consonants should be pronounced double, like the double n in ‘thinness’ (not as in ‘Guinness’, which has a single sound). This helps to distinguish e.g. between *alium* ‘someone else’ and *allium* ‘garlic’, or between *annus* ‘year’ and *anus* ‘old woman’.

C and G in classical pronunciation are always hard, as in cat and gas.

The combination CH is best pronounced just like C. It is not really a Latin sound at all; *pulcher* ‘beautiful’ was originally spelt *pulcer*, but the *h* was added in the 1st cent. BC because then it was fashionable to sound Greek (see ‘Greek sounds’ below).

V was pronounced originally like English w, but changed to the sound of V in many parts of the Empire. However, the w sound appears to have survived in Britain (cf. English ‘wine’) and it is most likely that Minimus would have pronounced *vinum* with a w-sound at the beginning.

Greek sounds

There are a number of sounds which occur in Greek borrowings in Latin but not as a rule in native Latin words. Romans who knew Greek might have tried to pronounce them as in Greek, while others would have used an approximation:

ch, th, rh like c, t, r

ph like f (as in *philosophia* ‘philosophy’)

eu like e + u (as in *Europa* ‘Europe’)

y like i (in Greek, this sounded like French u or German ü)

z like English z or dz.