

MINIMUS PRONUNCIATION GUIDE FULL VERSION

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.

Minimus himself would have used a sign called an apex, like an accent mark, to show that a vowel was long: *félés félix est* ‘the cat is lucky’, *félés múrem ést* ‘the cat eats the mouse’. A long I could be written literally as a long letter I, as in *FELIX*. Nowadays a straight horizontal line over the letter can be used to mark a long vowel – ā ē ī ō ū, but often long vowels are not marked at all and one has to work out which it is from the context.

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. But in Minimus’ time, it seems, it tended to be pronounced more like the sound of *ai* in the English word *air* or *fair*. In later Latin spelling and in modern languages, it becomes e.

AU was originally pronounced like ow in now, and this is the classical pronunciation. But Minimus may have pronounced it, at least sometimes, like a long o sound; e.g. the word *cauda* ‘tail’ had become *coda* (as in modern Italian).

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*. By Minimus’ time the nasal sound was disappearing and the N and M could be treated as silent letters: Minimus himself may well have pronounced

mensa ‘table’ as *mesa*, just as in modern Spanish. But modern classicists always pronounce these letters exactly as they are spelt.

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 ‘soft’ pronunciation as in circus and ginger may have been current at least regionally in ancient times – the comic playwright Plautus c. 200 BC makes a pun on the name Sosias (‘saviour’ in Greek) and *socius* ‘helper’. But it does not seem to have become widespread until about 500 AD, and the hard sound survived in Britain longer than almost anywhere else (c and g are still hard in Welsh words derived from Latin). Minimus almost certainly said *keerkoos* for circus.

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. as is shown by the fact that it was constantly confused with B in spelling. In Minimus’ time a speaker from the eastern half of the Empire or from Rome itself would probably have pronounced e.g. *vinum* ‘wine’ with an initial v sound. 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.