

How to Write Greek Iambics

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To write Greek iambics, you need to know how to:

- turn your ideas into simple Greek words;
- read the rhythm, or natural metre, of Greek words; and
- arrange the words into iambic lines.

This document will get you started learning these three skills.

1. How to turn your ideas into simple Greek words

You first have to break out of the abstract “English” way of writing and thinking. At page 2 of his *Demonstrations in Greek Iambic Verse*, Rouse says that:

it cannot be too often said that a good copy of Greek verses may be made with the simplest possible words. The student will acquire his vocabulary in time; at first all he need do, is to reduce the English to its simplest terms, and so translate it.

Sidgwick confirms this. In section 97 of his *Introduction to Greek Prose Composition*, he says that the

first point that it is necessary to impress on those who are to translate English into Greek is the great simplicity and directness of Greek as compared with English. Constantly we come to a sentence in English expressed with abstract words to describe a concrete fact. This is so natural to us, that even in the simplest narratives abstract words and forms of expression are of frequent occurrence. Thus we say, to quote the instance just given, ‘I took pleasure in her society,’ where the Greeks said, ‘I was pleased being with her.’ Here in the English there are two abstract words ‘pleasure,’ and ‘society,’ both of which

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the Greek avoids. In translating this into Greek the thing to do is to *neglect entirely the form* in which the English sentence appears, and *think only of the fact* which is being related: when that is clearly understood, then translate it into Greek in the simplest and plainest way.

Sidgwick is talking about writing Greek prose here, but in his *Introduction to Greek Verse Composition, with Exercises* he says that the same rule applies when writing iambs (although you can also use metaphors, similes and other “poetic” expressions here and there to add colour).

One way to “think only of the fact” and “neglect entirely the form” is to:

1. first, think of the best single *verb* to explain what’s actually “happening” in your idea; then
2. if that verb doesn’t sufficiently explain *everything* that’s “happening,” think of another verb which adds the detail, and make it a *participle* (Greek is full of participles) or an *infinitive* (if appropriate); then
3. if you need to add even more detail to the first verb (or to the participle), see if a prepositional phrase might be the simplest way to explain it (e.g. “into the ...,” “from the...,” *etc.*); then
4. if there’s an object (whether direct or indirect) of the verb, participle or infinitive, find the most simple Greek word for it; then
5. think of a simple way to explain the subject (this might be a name, or a noun, or less commonly in poetry, an adjective or participle or adverb with the article).

So find the right verbs first, then think of the substantives. Only try to find other types of words now — like adverbs (e.g. “now,” “again”), adjectives (e.g. “good”), pronouns (e.g. “that,” “my”) — if they’re essential to your idea. Otherwise, you can find these types of words later, if you need “filler” words (see section 3 below).

2. How to read the rhythm, or natural metre, of the Greek words

The rhythm of all Greek poetry, and the poetic parts of good Greek prose, comes from the balanced combination of long (–) and short (˘) syllables. When you write iambs, you’ll use slightly more long syllables than short, always following (as a beginner) this pattern:

⏏-⏏-⏏-⏏-⏏-⏏

You can put either a long or a short syllable in the ⏏ spots. You'll need to figure out the rhythm of each of your Greek words (i.e. whether each syllable is long or short), so that you can fit them into this pattern. Follow these rules to figure this out.

A syllable is short ⏏ if:

- it contains one short vowel (see below) with no consonants between it and the next vowel; or
- it contains one short vowel with just one consonant between it and the next vowel (unless the consonant is ρ at the start of the next word); or
- it contains one short vowel followed by one of these combinations (in the same word or both in the next word) before the next vowel: βρ, γρ, δρ, θλ, θμ, θν, θρ, κμ, κν, κρ, πλ, πν, πρ, τλ, τμ, τν, τρ, φλ, φν, φρ, χλ, χν, χρ; or
- it contains one short vowel followed by the combination κλ (in the same word or both in the next word) before the next vowel (unless the short vowel is part of the word ἐκ compounded with another word, e.g. ἐκλέγω, -⏏-); or
- it contains the combination αι or οι followed by a vowel in the same word (e.g. ποιεῖν, ⏏-; τοιοῦτος, ⏏-⏏)

Otherwise the syllable's long (-).

Short vowels are:

- ε, epsilon
- ο, omicron
- (in some words) α, ι, υ alpha, iota and upsilon. This is the tricky bit...

In a word like νικῶ, "I conquer," you won't know straight away whether or not the iota is a short vowel. It might be long (and in fact it is). You'll have to look it up each time (unless the syllable breaks all the five rules above for short syllables, e.g. if it's followed by three consonants: then you know it's long without doubt). To look it up:

- First, check the LSJ, which is available online at [Perseus](#). If LSJ puts a – or ◡ mark over the vowel, you’re lucky: it has answered your question; otherwise
- if the vowel is in a name, e.g. Ἴκκαρος, look up the name at the end of [Woodhouse’s English-Greek dictionary](#). Woodhouse shows you that Ἴκκαρος is –◡◡ (the last syllable is short due to rule 2 of the rules for short syllables above); or
- if the vowel is in the first part of the word (before the inflected ending), look up the base word in the biggest Greek dictionary you can find, and hopefully it will have a – or ◡ mark above the vowel; or
- if the vowel is in the inflected ending of the word, look up a grammar which has – and ◡ symbols marked over the endings; or finally
- if you’ve had no luck, you can do a word search on Perseus for the word used in other poems, e.g. by Homer, Sophocles or Aeschylus. (This is the hardest way to do it: you’ll need to know how to read the different rhythm patterns used in each of these poems).

If you can figure out the rhythm of each of your simple Greek words, you’re almost done.

3. How to arrange Greek words into iambic lines

Firstly note that you’ll be arranging into iambs not *words*, but *words and natural groups*. “Into the house”, “and Zeus”, “my father”, “I ask you”: treat each of these “natural groups” (and groups like them) as *one word* when writing iambs. Enclitics and words like them form one group, or one “word”, with the word that goes before; particles, prepositions and some conjunctions with the word that comes after. Rouse (at page 3) gives some examples of natural groups:

- τοῖς λόγοις –◡– : the article attached, although often the article is left out altogether when writing verse;
- καὶ τούτων --- : the conjunction attached;
- πρὸς αὐτούς ◡--- : the preposition attached;
- τοῦτό μου –◡– : the enclitic attached;

- τούτων δὲ ---υ : the postpositive attached; and
- τοῦτ' ἔχει -υ- : the object "this" attached.

Now, put your words and groups into any of the combinations set out in tables A and B.

υ	-	υ	-	υ	-	υ	-	υ	-	υ	υ
Ἔρωσ		Ἀπόλλων						Ἀρτοβαζάνης			
υ-		υ--						-υ-υ-			
Ἔκτωρ		Ὅμηρος						Ἀρτεμίσιον			
--		υ-υ				Ἔρωσ		-υ-υυ			
Αἴγισθος		Ἔκτωρ				-υ		Ἀινείας		Ἔρωσ	
--υ		--						----		υ-	
Ὅμηρος		Ἔρωσ						Οἰδίπους		Ἴτυς	
υ-υ		-υ						-υ-		υυ	
Ἀναξίμανδρος								Ἀντισθένης			
υ-υ-υ								--υ-			
Ἀριστογείτων								Ἀσκλήπιος			
υ-υ--								--υυ			
								Οἰδίπους			
								-υ-			
								Ἀνακρέων			
								υ-υ-			
								Ἐπέρβολος			
								υ-υυ			
								Οἰδίπους			
								-υ-			
								Ἀρχέδαμος		Ἴκαρος	
								-υ-υ		-υυ	
								Ἔρωσ			
								υ-			
								Ἀρτοβαζάνης		Ἴτυς	
								-υ-υ-		υυ	

Table A.

Ἔρωσ Ἔκτωρ Ἄναξιμανδρος Ἄρξειδαμος Ἄντισθένης Ἄνακρέων Ἄναξιμανδρος Ἄριστογείτων	Οἰδίπους Ἰκαρος Ἄινείας Οἰδίπους Ἄρτοβαζάνης Ἄρτεμίσιον Ἄρωσ Ἰτυς
Table B.	

Before you do that, try reading out different combinations of names from each table. E.g., in table A, read out the *top* names in the left column and then the *bottom* names in the right column:

Ἔρωσ ὕ- Ἀπόλλων ὕ-- Ἄρτοβαζάνης ὕ-ὕ- Ἰτυς ὕ.

You'll see that this fits the iambic pattern:

ὕ-ὕ-ὕ-ὕ-ὕ-ὕ-

Try other combinations; they'll all work. Your job is, then, to fit your Greek words into *one* of the possible combinations (either in table A or table B; it doesn't matter which).

For example, using the example combination just given, if you replace Ἔρωσ ὕ- with the simple verb ἔχει ("he has..."),

ἔχει ὕ-ὕ-ὕ-ὕ-ὕ-

and then replace Ἄρτοβαζάνης ὕ-ὕ- with the simple participle group τοῦτο λαμβάνων ("taking/seizing it"),

ἔχει ὕ-ὑ τοῦτο λαμβάνων ὕὑ

you only need to find words with the same rhythm as Ἄπόλλων ὕ-- and Ἴτρυς ὕὑ to fill up the line.

If you look at table A, you'll see that you can also use a word with the rhythm of Ὀμηρος ὕ-ὑ instead of Ἄπόλλων ὕ--, and another word with the rhythm of Ἐρως ὕ- instead of Ἴτρυς ὕὑ.

Three final tips for arranging your words into iambs:

- Try not to use a word *beginning* with a vowel if the word before it (in the same line) *ends* with a vowel.
- If you have small gaps in your lines which you can't fill, don't change the verbs. Instead, try to think of small adverbs, adjectives or even conjunctions to fill the gaps.
- Watch out for the rhythm of the last syllable of words *changing* once you've put them into a line. E.g., if you start a line with θέλουσι ὕ-ὑ "they want" (replacing Ὀμηρος ὕ-ὑ in table A):

θέλουσι -ὑ-ὑ-ὑ-ὑὑ

and then add κτείνειν -- "to kill/put to death" after it (replacing Ἐκτωρ -- in table A):

θέλουσι κτείνειν -ὑ-ὑ-ὑὑ

your line will be incorrect. The "κτ" in κτείνειν will change the short ὕ last syllable of the previous word θέλουσι into a long -, and so θέλουσι κτείνειν will have the rhythm ὕ----, which can't fit into iambic verse.

4. Going Forward

This document sets out the *techniques* you'll need to follow to actually write iambs. Books on composing iambs, like Sidgwick's *Introduction to Greek Prose Composition*, won't teach you these things. Instead, they set out the rules, principles and terminology of iambic metrics. Once you can write a few simple lines, you'll find books like Sidgwick's useful.

Don't rush into memorising all the rules, exceptions and terminology just yet though: you don't want to drown in all the possible ways to write a line. If you can bring together simple and direct words into iambs, bringing out the natural rhythm of the Greek, you'll get a good clear Greek style, which you can enrich with poetic expressions as you come across them. This skill will improve your Greek overall. As Rouse says (at *vii-viii*):

Before concluding I would express my firm conviction that time spent on verse composition is not wasted, even if the pupil never writes a good copy. A knowledge of verse rhythm is worth having, and he will probably never get a sound knowledge of rhythm, either verse or prose, unless he has written verses. Rhythm is so marked in verse that it cannot be missed by any except the utterly hopeless. How any ordinary person can understand the rhythm of prose if he cannot understand the rhythm of verse, passes my comprehension; on the other hand, verse once understood, it is a shorter step to the teaching of prose rhythm.

Citations

W.H.D. Rouse, *Demonstrations in Greek Iambic Verse*, 1899.

A. Sidgwick, *Introduction to Greek Prose Composition*, thirteenth edition, 1908.

A. Sidgwick, *Introduction to Greek Verse Composition, with exercises*, nineteenth edition, 1963.

Appendix: Opening speech Prometheus Bound

I've never found a book which fully sets out the rhythm of iambic parts of e.g. Sophocles or Aeschylus (instead, they just set out the general pattern and the general metric rules). Try working through these first 11 lines of *Prometheus Bound*, comparing them against the rules in section 2 of this document. Where I've had to look up an alpha, iota or upsilon, I've made a note under the line (so that you can see how I figured it out). Remember, the basic iambic pattern is:

υ-υ-υ-υ-υ-υ

although when you *pronounce* iambic lines, the last syllable of *every* line is read long, whether or not it's naturally long or short. This gives a slight break between the lines.

1. Χθόνος μὲν ἔς τῆλοῦρόν ἠκόμην πέδον,
2. Σκύθην ἔς οἴμον, ἄβατον εἰς ἐρημίαν.

Σκύθην: upsilon is short, Woodhouse, page 1025.

ἄβατον: this is three short syllables (υυυ). The first 2 (short) syllables of the word add up to 1 long syllable (which would normally be used here). Using 2 short syllables in place of 1 long syllable is called "resolution". Sophocles and Aeschylus only use resolution (breaking the normal iambic pattern) about 1 in 20 lines. There's no need to use resolution as a beginner learning to write iambs.

3. Ἥφαιστῆ, σοὶ δὲ χρῆ μέλειν ἐπιστόλας

δέ is not made long by the following 2 consonants of the next word, χρῆ. See rule 3 in the rules for short syllables (in section 2 above).

4. ἄς σοὶ πάτηρ ἐφεῖτό, τόνδε πρὸς πέτραις

The last syllable of τόνδε is not made long by the following 2 consonants of the next word, πρὸς. See rule 3 in the rules for short syllables (in section 2 above).

5. ὑψηλοκρήμνοις τὸν λεῶργὸν ὀχμάσαι

6. ἄδαμάντινων δεσμῶν ἐν ἄρρηκτοῖς πέδαϊς.

ἄδαμαντίων has the first 2 syllables short, resolving a long syllable which could otherwise go in their place. See Theocritus 3.39, showing the first 2 syllables short.

7. τὸ σὸν γὰρ ἄνθος, πάντέχνοῦ πυρός σέλας,

πυρός: upsilon is short: see Iliad 7.79.

8. θνητοῖσι κλέψας ὥπασεν· τοῖσδε τοῖ

κλέψας: alpha is long, because it's an aorist nominative participle ending (Smyth §306).

τοῖσδε: the combination οι- is short before a vowel in the same word: see rule 5 in the rules for short syllables (in section 2 above).

9. ἄμαρτίας σφεῖ δεῖ θεοῖς δοῦναι δίκην,

ἄμαρτίας: first alpha is short: see Aeschylus, Agamemnon, line 1197.

10. ὥς ἄν διδάχθῃ τὴν Διὸς τυραννίδα

τυραννίδα: upsilon is short (see LSJ).

11. στέργειν, φίλανθρώπου δὲ παύεσθαι τρόπου.