

The Greek Elegiac Couplet

A Writer's Guide

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Λευκογδοάδης has called upon us to write verse and to publish our efforts on the Textkit forum. He has kindly provided guidance for the Latinists, but there are a few differences in Greek practice, so I thought I'd summarize some of the rules μήτε βαρβαρίζωμεν μήτε σολοικίζωμεν. I do assume that you have at least some experience with Greek verse. A little Homer is probably enough if you're brave enough to be reading this document in the first place.

Prosody. If you're used to scanning Homer, you'll not go wrong using Homeric rules for determining long and short syllables. However the elegiasts had some flexibility with some consonant clusters so that a preceding short vowel could be scanned long or short as necessary.

If a plosive (π β φ, τ δ θ, κ γ χ) is followed by a liquid (λ ρ) or a nasal (μ ν), then a preceding short vowel may be short or long. For example, both of these words may be scanned ◡◡ or –◡ as the meter requires: τέκνα, πατρός. However — there are always exceptions — the combinations γμ, γν, δμ, δν always make a long syllable.

The preposition ἐκ is always –, no matter what consonant follows, whether part of a compound or not. So ἐκλαλῶ must scan –◡–.

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The Lines. The elegiac couplet is made up of two lines — it is also called the elegiac *distich* — the first of which is just a Homeric dactylic hexameter:

- ̄ - ̄ - ̄ - | ̄ ̄ - : ̄ - ̄ ̄ - -

Usually the caesura will occur after the first long (-|̄) or after the first short (-|̄) of the third foot, as I've marked. Less frequent but allowed is a caesura after the first long syllable of the fourth foot, usually if a long word fills the entire third foot. But *avoid* a word break between the two short syllables of the fourth foot (Hermann's bridge).

I have written the fifth foot out as a dactyl. Contraction is allowed there, but is rare, about one line in 20 in Homer, and is very much less frequent in many later poets.

The second line of the couplet is the so-called pentameter. The name is misleading, but it's historical so we're stuck with it. It's best thought of as two *hemiepes*: -̄̄-̄̄-. In the first hemiepes contraction is allowed, in the second it is not.

- ̄ - ̄ - | - ̄ ̄ - ̄ ̄ -

The caesura is invariant. Among the archaic poets the two hemiepes sometimes rhyme. About one line in seven of Theognis does this, τοῦτ' ἔπος ἀθανάτων | ἦλθε διὰ στομάτων. *Theog.* 18.

In the pentameter line try to avoid ending the first hemiepes with a short vowel, even if the following word starts with two consonants which would make position (earlier poets were more willing to do this).

Elision and Hiatus. Classical Greek poetry has a strong aversion to hiatus: adjacent vowels at word boundaries. So, a phrase like ποίημα αἰτεῖς is not allowed. If we elide the final alpha, ποίημ' αἰτεῖς, it can be admitted into the verse. However some final vowels may not elide (such as the final iota in ὄτι), so you cannot follow these with words starting in a vowel.

Early poets were a *little* tolerant of hiatus across the caesura. Don't do this too often. Early elegiasts sometimes observed digamma under the influence of Epic. Since most of us reading Greek these days don't pronounce ἄναξ *wanaks* it may be best not to resurrect digamma in our modern verses (though such displays of learning have a long history in Greek poetry — your call).

Earlier poets allow elision at the caesura boundary; later ones avoid it. Beginning poets may want to take care with this.

Subtleties of the Caesura. Because the caesura represents a phrase boundary, or a break, however weak, in sense, it is important to take care that certain kinds of phrases do not straddle the caesura boundary. For example, neither *καί* nor *ἀλλά* should ever occur immediately before a caesura, nor should enclitics, such as *τε* and *μέν*, occur immediately after.

It's best to avoid having a preposition immediately before the caesura unless it's acting adverbially.

It is more common to start a new phrase or sentence slightly after the caesura. Try to avoid ending a sentence just before.

Poetic Grammar and Vocabulary. Thanks to the influence of Epic, Greek elegiacs had a number of grammatical and spelling variations to choose from. I'll mention a few of the more popular ones, but try not to work all of these liberties into a single poem. We have poems from the Greek Anthology making fun of people using too many archaisms.

First, contract verbs in *-έω* may resist contraction, or not, as you require. But verbs in *-άω* and *-όω* should contract.

The first person plural middle ending may be *-μεθα* $\cup\cup$ or *-μεσθα* $-\cup$.

The first declension dative plural may be *-αις* $-$, *-αισι* $-\cup$ or *-αισιν* $-\cup$. Similarly the second declension dative plural may be *-οις* $-$, *-οισι* $-\cup$ or *-οισιν* $-\cup$. Avoid using the nu-movable forms before a word starting with a consonant to produce a closed syllable (a few poets sometimes do).

The third declension dative plural may be *-σι* \cup , *-σιν* \cup or *-εσσι* $-\cup$, *-εσσιν* $-\cup$. Again, avoid using the nu-movable forms to make position.

For *σύν* you may use *ξύν*, which will make position for a preceding short vowel.

For *πρός* you may use *ποτί* or *προτί*.

For the third person singular pronoun, you may use enclitic *μιν* for the accusative.

The definite article is freely omitted, even with demonstratives. *οὗτος ἀνήρ* is an error in prose but perfectly fine in verse.

Indefinite relative or temporal clauses with the subjunctive may omit *ἄν*.

The accusative may be used without a preposition to indicate destination, *πόλιν ἦλθεν*.