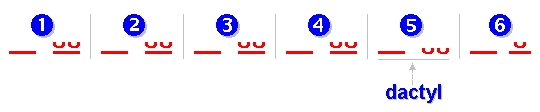
The meter (poetic rhythm) of epic is called the dactylic hexameter. ‘Dactylic’ because the basic unit of the metrical scheme (rhythmical structure) is called a dactyl; ‘hexameter’ because each verse line is made up of six (‘hex’, Greek for six) measures or feet (‘metra’, ‘metron’ in the Greek singular). These 6 units are each made up of 2-3 syllables.

Latin verse is quantitative, i.e., the syllables are long (or ‘heavy’) or short (or ‘light’). Note that we are talking about syllables here and not vowels. So a naturally short vowel in Latin can form a long syllable. Most importantly, we are not talking about stress, as in English verse. Stress did play a role in Latin verse, but it was not relevant to the metrical quantities. So, if one were to adapt the Latin metrical units to their English (i.e, stressed) counterparts, we might think of, e.g., ‘MUR-mur-ing’, ‘AND-er-son’ (trisyllabic dactyls); ‘WELL-LOVED’; ‘MEAD-ows’ (bisyllabic spondee or trochee, respectively). But, again, in Latin what determines the meter is not these stressed and unstressed syllables, but rather long and short ones (i.e., I’m just using English words as an analogy).

Here’s the scheme, with the horizontal lines representing heavy/long syllables, the ‘u’s light/short syllables. The vertical lines marks the divisions between measures or feet. The fifth foot of a hexameter is typically (though far from always) a dactyl, as marked.



The last syllable may be naturally short but will scan long (a principle known as *breuis in longo*), so in some ways the final ‘u’ in the scheme above is misleading.

Word breaks play an important role in structuring the verse line, especially one (or occasionally two) principal word breaks around the middle. These breaks are known as a caesura (when in the middle of a foot) or a diaeresis (when coinciding with a foot break). The typical principal word break is a caesura located in the third foot, usually after the first heavy/long syllable or the first light/short. The most common symbol used for such a break is a double vertical line: || (not marked in the scheme).

Factors that affect the number and quantity/length (long or short) of syllables (which apply to all Latin meters, not just hexameters):

* Naturally long vowels make long syllables (e.g., the last syllable of puellā - a particular inflected form of the word for ‘girl’). Note that most Latin texts online do not contain macrons that indicate the natural length of vowels.
* Diphthongs (two adjacent vowels pronounced together) are always long: ae, au, eu, ei, oe, and in limited cases ui.
* Elision: if there is a vowel (or ‘m’) at the end of one word and a vowel (or h) beginning the next one, the first vowel is elided (bracket it and discount for the purpose of counting syllables).
* Prodelision: similar to elision, but only applies to parts of the verb esse ‘to be’ (usually est ‘he/she/it is’), of which the ‘e’, rather than the vowel/’m’ ending the previous word, is elided.
* Position: a short vowel before two consonants makes a long syllable. A short vowel followed, first, by a mute (c, k, g, t, th, d, p, ph, b) or the fricative ‘f’ AND, second, a liquid (l, r): may be long or short (e.g. patres can be v - or - -)

Syllabification: Where do you divide syllables into feet? I.e., where do you put your vertical foot markers when scanning? There are exceptions, but a good general rule is to throw as many consonants into the next syllable as possible (up to the end of the next syllable or the end of the word), but only as many consonants as can make the start of a (any) Latin word. So, ar-ma (since ma- begins many Latin words), but not a-rma (since the cluster rma- does not exist at the beginning of any Latin word).

There are exceptions and qualifications to some of the above, but following these rules will result in correction scansion of the vast majority of Latin hexameters.