

Vīta nostra brevis est
Life our short is

Vīta life
Nostra our
Brevis short, brief
Est he/she/it is

Brevī finiētur
Shortly it-will-be-ended

Brevī shortly

Finiētur it-will-be-ended, it-will-be-finished. Note that in English this phrasing has two possible senses, and the difference is a little bit subtle: (Sense 1) At some future point it will be in a condition of ‘finished’, that is at some future point it will be over and done with, which is the sense that I think most people would assume is meant. (Sense 2) The meaning here, as this verb is used in Latin, is the future tense of a passive verb. We don’t know who is doing the action of ending or finishing off, and we are not talking about a future state of being. We’re talking about something (in this case our life) having an action done on it in the future.

You can perhaps see the difference better in a present-tense example: *It is torn*. Look how there’s a different sense in the two ways of using this verb: (1) She can’t read the address, because the envelope is torn (linking verb plus predicate adjective, which also happens to be a participle). (2) Here’s how to make ramen noodles. First, the packet of noodles is removed from the box, and the flavoring packet is removed from the box. Next, the packet of noodles is torn open and the flavoring packet is torn on the dotted line. Next, blah blah blah. (‘Is removed’ and ‘is torn’ are examples of the present passive form of a verb. In this case ‘is’ is a helping verb, not a linking verb.) Do not worry if you don’t understand this. It is not crucial for right now.

Venit mors velōciter
It-comes death quickly

Venit he/she/it comes
Mors death
Velōciter quickly

Rapit nōs atrōciter
It-seizes us violently

Rapit he/she/it seizes
Nōs us
Atrōciter violently, cruelly, savagely, harshly

Nēminī parcētur
To-no-one it-is-spared

Nēminī to-no-one. A morphological variant of nēmō.

Parcētur it-is-spared

The sense of the line: No one is spared from death.