How to Learn Japanese

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Why learn Japanese?

Japan has a fantastically rich culture, wonderful people and the latest technology to say nothing of the great food and shopping. You may already be set on going to Japan and know that learning Japanese is what you want to do. Others may just want to visit for a short time. It's possible to enjoy a very comfortable life in Japan even without English but learning some of the language will definitely improve the experience a great deal.

Even those who for some reason do not intend to visit Japan may still gain from studying the language. I believe that almost everyone can benefit from learning a foreign language and that budding linguists could do a lot worse than choose to learn Japanese. It will certainly give you a whole new perspective on English. Your CV will stand out from the crowd of Spanish speakers. I use my Japanese to communicate with my wife, follow martial arts, read and watch *manga* and even to read basic Chinese signs. It's surprising how useful it is.

Learning Japanese is immensely rewarding and not as difficult as people think, providing you approach it correctly. When I went to Japan to work as an English teacher in 2001 I remember expecting to pick up Japanese within 6 months or so. With hindsight, this was rather naïve of me considering I had never gotten very far with the languages I had studied at school (or most of the other subjects either!). I was confident that before long I would be impressing everyone with my new-found language skills and that upon my triumphant return to Britain I would be able to answer “yes” to anyone asking if I spoke Japanese.

6 months later and my Japanese had not progressed much. Little wonder; I was battling with long working hours, English speaking friends, lack of academic discipline, expensive yet inefficient Japanese classes and general linguistic ineptitude. I did have two things in my favour: I liked studying *kanji* and I refused to give up. Eventually, I found study methods that worked for me and went on to pass the Japanese Language Proficiency Test level 1 in 2005. If I had known in 2001 what I know now, the journey would have been a lot easier.

With this book, it is my intention to pass on this hard-won knowledge to help you avoid the many pitfalls of learning Japanese and give you the tools to reach a high standard much quicker than I did. The Japanese themselves do not usually wish each other luck but rather say *ganbatte* (do your best*). Ganbatte* and good luck on your quest!

Learning to learn

Language learning can be divided into four interrelated skills. The active skills: speaking and writing, and the passive skills: reading and listening. The active skills are considered harder to acquire than the passive ones i.e. listening is easier than speaking, reading is easier than writing although this is not always the case. With Japanese, the writing system is quite complicated which also plays a part.

All four skills are built upon vocabulary and knowledge of grammar however, they will each need to be developed in different ways.

Where to start
Start by learning the most common and most useful phrases that you will hear in daily conversation in Japan. I have provided a list on my website here. Note that you must familiarise yourself with the rules of Japanese pronunciation as soon as possible if you have no source of spoken Japanese to relate these phrases to. If you do not, you are likely to pick up bad habits that will take time to unlearn. Pronunciation is dealt with in the next chapter.

Next, read about Japanese grammar. A lightweight book like Japanese Grammar is ideal at this stage. You don't have to take everything in right away but hopefully you will start to relate some of the grammar to the phrases you have learned. Simply parroting phrases with no real understanding of how they are put together will not get you very far.

Once you have some basics you should go on to studying dialogues and short passages in textbooks like Japanese for Busy People. If possible, you should attend classes somewhere. I discuss possible options here.

If you are going to learn Japanese. the sooner you start the better. This definitely applies to learning to read and write. You should begin with *katakana* (characters used for foreign loan words), then go on to *hiragana* (the basic Japanese script – *hiragana* and *katakana* are together known as *kana)* and finally *kanji* (Chinese characters). I discuss methods of attaining literacy in Japanese here.

Once you have good grasp of basic grammar and vocabulary, you will need to start reading books aimed at Japanese learners. I recommend several here. Watching Japanese TV programs and films regularly will aid your progress. Gain as much speaking practice as possible. Taking exams in Japanese like the JLPT may provide you with motivation.

If you stick with a logical and disciplined approach to your *kanji* studies, you may reach the point at which you can start reading Japanese articles, stories and novels. This is a real accomplishment and further than many will ever get. It is possible to reach this point within a year with an efficient study plan and hard work.

Should I learn to read and write Japanese?
This depends on you and your goals. Becoming literate in Japanese is a formidable task. Many foreigners decide that they only want to speak Japanese. Someone who plans to stay a couple of months in Japan may have different goals to someone who marries a Japanese person and intends to live in Japan for a long time.

It is perfectly possible to write Japanese in roman letters (*romaji*) and you could, for example, communicate with Japanese people by email using this method. Obviously, you will not be able to read real Japanese but you would be able to ask nearby Japanese people to read things for you if necessary (assuming you were reasonably fluent).

Another option is to learn the *kana*. There are about 50 *hiragana* and 50 *katakana*. This can be done fairly quickly and will definitely be of use to you if you go to Japan. This would allow you to read some signs and shop names (useful for knowing where to get off on the train or finding all-you-can-eat restaurants!).

I recommend learning *katakana* first as they are a little easier to write and are generally used for English loan words (although some loan words are from other languages). Thus an English native speaker would be able to start understanding real Japanese immediately upon mastering *katakana* (though only to a very limited

extent). Learning *hiragana* is worthwhile but there is less “instant gratification” as without a vocabulary you will have to look unknown words up in the dictionary. You will not be able to read notices or newspaper articles without a thorough knowledge of *kanji.*

Finally, and this is the course I recommend, you could learn *kana* and *kanji*. As stated, there are about 100 *kana.* These should be learnt first and shouldn't pose too much difficulty. The main hurdle is the *kanji*. There are 1945 *jouyou* (everyday use) *kanji* and about another 100 name *kanji* (names are notoriously difficult to read). Each *kanji* may contain up to 30 strokes (although the majority contain much less than this) and can have several pronunciations.

Learning *kanji* is difficult but not impossible and the skill is sure to impress most people you meet. There are several other reasons for learning *kanji*, the chief one being that they are essential to read real Japanese and distinguish between the many homonyms inherent in Japanese. In addition, many consider they are aesthetically pleasing. The topic of learning *kanji* is covered in more detail below.

Approaches to learning
Now that you have decided to learn Japanese let’s look at some effective ways to study. Previous experience studying other languages will help you a little as you will know what kind of methods work for you and you will have some kind of idea of the time and effort involved.

Japanese is very different to English and thus harder for English speakers to learn than a relatively similar language like, say, French. Koreans tend to pick up Japanese quite quickly as Korean and Japanese grammar share some similarities. Likewise, Chinese people have a tremendous advantage with the writing system as they learn *kanji* at school. A background in either of these two languages would definitely be beneficial; however, it is perfectly possible to learn from scratch. Indeed, English speakers actually have one advantage over Chinese speakers as Japanese borrows many words from English.

Finding a teacher
Once you have read a couple of books and articles and memorised the most common phrases, it's worth finding yourself a teacher. Most people will not become fluent in Japanese without some kind of teacher. Sadly, it has been my experience that good Japanese teachers are hard to find.

A good teacher should want you to improve, make learning interesting (up to a point), speak at a level you can understand or almost understand and correct your mistakes and give you feedback. They should adapt their teaching methods to suit your learning style. They should not leave you behind to concentrate on more advanced students nor hold you back at the pace of lower level students.

A good teacher is not necessarily a professional; by having an understanding of what you need as a student you can turn friends or language partners into effective teachers. A good teacher does not necessarily have to speak English well; certainly, the less English they use in class, the better.

It's essential to remember final responsibility for your improvement rests with you, not your teacher. If you don't put the intellectual effort in, you will not reach your goals.

Let's look at some of your options.

Language schools
There are many private language schools in Japan and these usually charge around 2-3 thousand yen per hour for a group class of anything up to 10 students. Students can be from various countries which can lead to problems as the English speakers struggle to keep up with the Koreans and Chinese. Find a class where you do not struggle at the bottom or become bored at the top. Many schools will operate a level system based on exams.

You will likely have to pay in advance to enter a school like this so I strongly suggest caution before spending a great deal of money. Do other foreigners recommend the place? What difference did it make to their Japanese? I have seen many people drop out of such courses for a number of reasons ranging from a change of employer and schedule to inability to keep up with the homework.

I do not recommend private language schools for those living in Japan due to the cost and abundance of potential free learning material. If you can get your company to pay for your classes, or you have no problem with the cost, then they can work well. If you are on a budget, make sure you check out the other options before spending your hard-earned yen.

Volunteer language schools are quite common in Japan especially in the larger cities. Classes tend to be quite cheap (maybe a couple of thousand yen per term) and again you will find a mix of nationalities. The teachers tend to be retired people or aspiring Japanese teachers (becoming a qualified teacher of Japanese is quite an arduous task). These organisations can usually be found advertising through the local international centre or foreigner magazines. It's well worth going to classes like these and sometimes you can come to an arrangement for cheap private lessons with one of the teachers. Classes are also a good place to find study partners if you're having trouble finding like-minded students.

You could also try placing a wanted-ad at the local international centre or searching online for a teacher/school. With the advancement of web-cam technology, it is possible to learn Japanese over the net. If you decide to go this route, make sure you are getting value for money.

Language exchange
Language exchange is another common method for learning and it's extremely easy to find Japanese people who will offer to teach you Japanese in return for some English. Language exchange most often takes place in cafés or through a chat program on the net.

The problem here, especially for beginner learners of Japanese, is that the Japanese person will have the linguistic advantage and end up explaining everything in English, the result being that a lot of time is spent speaking in English and very little spent speaking in Japanese. Remember that even an inexperienced English teacher can earn about 3,000 yen per hour teaching privately. If you are going to try language exchange, be sure to strictly divide the time equally and insist on speaking only in Japanese during the allotted time.

Women should note that meeting strangers for language exchange can be dangerous and should always arrange such meetings in public places. Japan has a reputation as a safe country but police still haven't caught the man who likely killed English teacher Lindsay Hawker.

Self-study
You will have to discipline yourself to do a certain amount of study on your own time whether you attend regular Japanese classes or not. A general guideline for those attending classes is to spend at least an equivalent amount of time on self-study. If you don't attend classes you should try to set aside a *minimum* of four half hour periods a week for study. Of course, the more you study the better and those who regularly undertake rigorous academic programs will be able to do more.

An English friend of mine astounded people with the speed with which he learnt Japanese. His secret? He was a smart guy who studied every evening for a couple of hours in coffee shops. Another friend of mine was a Chinese man whose aim was to get into university to study medicine. He studied an incredible 13 hours a day! It's always good to meet successful students - hopefully they will provide you with some inspiration.

Self study tips
- Find a nice, quiet place where you will not be interrupted to study.
- Use time spent travelling to study; train journeys are a great opportunity to review your *kanji*.
- Vary your study material. *Kanji*, vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading, writing and speaking should all be practised.
- Have a goal. This could be to finish reading a certain book, to learn a certain number of flashcards, to pass a certain exam or even to speak better Japanese than your annoying friend (this last one is a joke).
- Have a study plan. Writing out a detailed ten week study plan is not necessary but you should at least have an idea what you will be studying over the next month. For example I might decide that over the next two weeks I'm going to read through a book like A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Sentence Patterns while reviewing the first 500 *kanji*.
- Use your self-study time efficiently. Get what you need to do, done. Don't study half-heartedly.

- Keep a diary of what and how long you studied. How will you look back and judge your progress if you do not have a record of what you have done? Progress is very hard to measure at the intermediate and advanced levels and a diary will help keep you on the right track.
- Study with people who inspire and motivate you. Try not to study with friends who interrupt your studies.
- Study at pace you can consistently achieve - do not study so much that you burn out especially at first!
- Have fun! Learning Japanese is very rewarding! You will do much better if you are enjoying yourself learning Japanese than if you are not.

Building vocabulary
Vocabulary is the bedrock upon which your language skills are built. Building your vocabulary is a cumulative endeavour and you should aim to learn new words consistently whilst reviewing the older vocabulary regularly.

One of my favourite methods to learn vocabulary is to make my own flash cards. All you need is some paper, a pen and some scissors. Cut the paper up into small rectangles and write the Japanese word you want to remember on one side and the English equivalent on the other. Some like to write one word upside down as it will appear the right way up when the card is flipped. Simply shuffle the cards and go through the deck separating the words you know from the words you don't know. You will need to repeat the process with the words you didn't know until they are fully ingrained in your memory. You should practice going from Japanese to English and vice versa.

To help you, I have put a lot of vocabulary into printable flashcards on my website so you can print them out and cut them up. Cut out the English and Japanese together, glue the back quickly and fold in the middle to make an instant flashcard.

Mnemonics are very useful for those hard-to-remember words. Let's take a random word, *hebi* meaning "snake". Imagine yourself being bitten by a Japanese snake and saying "He bit me!" This kind of memory trick is absolutely invaluable for learning new words. The only limit is your imagination. Soon, the word will sink into your consciousness and you will not have to use the mnemonic.

Mnemonics are the basis for Heisig's Remembering the Kanji. Mnemonics come in many types from simple word mnemonics to visual mnemonics and imaginative mnemonics. It's well worth reading up on them.

It is important that you actually learn how to use new words in a sentence. It's very easy to use words incorrectly. For example, *majime* means serious but you cannot use it in the sense of "serious injury", only in the sense of a "no-nonsense person".

Learning grammar
Read through a decent grammar book (e.g. Japanese Grammar) at least once to get an overview of the language. Make sure you understand the meaning of grammatical words like verb, adverb, clause, intransitive etc.

The same flashcard tricks that are so useful for learning vocabulary can also be applied to chunks of grammar. Learning example sentences can be a great help when tackling a new grammar point. Make sure you know how the grammar connects to the other parts of the sentence (nouns, adjectives etc.).

Try to learn the grammar appropriate to your level and not get too advanced too quickly. Verbs and particles will need a lot of attention at first. I have organised the grammar in this book on a progressive need to know basis. If you need a comprehensive guide, check out A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Grammar and A Dictionary of Intermediate Japanese Grammar.

It is possible to speak fluently using a few grammatical structures that you know well but you will need to be familiar with a great deal more if you want to understand what people are saying. Know the ones you need for speech extremely well. Make sure you keep a note of any grammatical mistakes you make and do your best to correct them. Feedback from a native speaker will be invaluable for this and you must make sure

your teacher corrects your mistakes. Review, review, review.

Finally, note that some people are more concerned about speaking quickly than speaking correctly. Your focus should be on speaking clearly and correctly rather than achieving a high "words per minute". Speak in complete sentences wherever possible in order to become used to Japanese word order and sentence structure. I realise it will not be possible to speak with perfect grammar all the time but the more you ingrain your mistakes, the harder it will be to unlearn them.

Listening
It takes some time to develop *nihongo no mimi* (an ear for Japanese). At first, all you be able to make out will be the *–masu* and *–desu* endings (a Japanese friend once complained to me all he could hear of English was the "I"s and "You"s at the start of sentences). Speech will seem terribly fast but that is how natives speak.

The more you listen, the better your listening will get provided you are spending some time learning vocabulary. Ideally, you want exposure to comprehensible or almost comprehensible Japanese i.e. not too far above your level. Bear this in mind when selecting listening materials.

There are many sources of spoken Japanese suitable for learners. Japanese TV is especially great if you are learning to read because programs often have subtitles. Following TV is going to be all but impossible for a beginner but it's a great way to get exposure to the sound of real Japanese. Most serious language learners I know watch a lot of TV and switch it on in the background when doing housework etc. There are several programs on NHK (the government channel) aimed at students of Japanese.

If you live in Japan, joining clubs and taking part in activities is a good way to practice your listening. I belonged to a jiu jitsu club where most of the students couldn't or wouldn't speak English (some of the Brazilians couldn't even speak Japanese). Some people like to hang out in bars to practice their Japanese. I always found I got hassle from drunks wanting to practice their English on me.

Don't spend all your free time with other English speakers if you want your Japanese to improve. Make sure if you do make friends with Japanese people that you are not just speaking in English. You should not be working as someone's unpaid teacher.

Lots of textbooks come with CDs and tapes which are worth listening to. I like to rip them to my computer for use on my mp3 player. There are other sources of spoken Japanese available for download on the net. When you get more advanced (around level 2 JLPT) you might want to try listening to an audio book. I had the first two Harry Potter audio books and they were quite helpful.

If you have a microphone there are ways to record Japanese and play it back through your computer with programs like Audacity. I used to record the news and slow it down until I understood it. I also used to record interesting vocabulary for myself to listen to (hearing yourself speak Japanese is pretty weird at first).

Travel time is ideal for listening practice. Listen to your mp3 player while you shop. Try to listen to Japanese at home while doing the housework (at least your house will be clean and tidy). Be aware though that it's very easy to tune out when listening to Japanese. If you feel like your concentration is wandering and the Japanese is not really going in you might want to take a break.

What did you say?
You're in a conversation with a Japanese person and they say something incomprehensible. Relax, all is not lost. Let's look at some phrases to make communication easier.

Please speak more slowly.	*Motto yukkuri hanashite kudasai.*
Could you repeat that?	*Mou ichido onegai shimasu.*
What does that (word) mean?	*(Sono kotoba ha) Dou iu imi desu ka.*
In other words, you mean…	*Tsumari,*
I'm not good at understanding polite Japanese.	*Keigo ha amari wakarimasen.*

Of course, you are not just limited to these phrases. Feel free to come up with your own.

Speaking
For most people, speaking is the most rewarding part of learning a foreign language (*kanji* fetishists may disagree). The better you get, the more fun it is to speak Japanese. How do we achieve fluency then? Well, many people are confused as to what fluency actually means. In my opinion, fluency simply means that you can say what you want to say without resorting to a dictionary.

This kind of fluency can be most quickly achieved by preparing for the situations and topics you often encounter in your own life. I myself am much more comfortable discussing jiu jitsu and martial arts than I am talking about cookery. Before job interviews, I would make a special effort to practice my polite Japanese and review the vocabulary I was likely to need.

Be picky about what you learn. If you don't think you are likely to need a particular word, don't spend as much time on it as with other ones that you are likely to need. Apply the vocabulary you learn to your own life and you will master it much faster.

It's all very well to say "I want to speak like a native speaker" or "I want to be able to understand films perfectly" but these are quite lofty goals and will take a long time to realise. You don't have to have native-level Japanese to get a lot out of the language. It's better to set short term goals and exceed them rather than to get discouraged failing to achieve vague and unattainable goals. Better goals would be to say, "I want to be able to talk about my hobbies" or "I want to be able to enjoy samurai films".

All news is good news when learning to speak. Don't worry if you don't have anything momentous to impart to your friends or classmates. Explain to them your daily routine in detail if you have nothing else to say. The more you speak, the more you will improve. Grasp every opportunity to speak Japanese.

Confidence
One barrier many encounter is lack of confidence in their skills. It's interesting to note that attitudes to speaking in a foreign language often vary according to culture. I found Americans were generally confident speakers even when they didn't know a lot of Japanese. British learners were more worried about being correct and tended to downplay their abilities more.

Most Japanese will be impressed that you are trying to speak to them in their native language and won't be worried about any mistakes you make. The more you speak, the better, so try not to let lack of confidence hold you back. Sometimes you'll end up in classes with other learners who are better than you. Try to look at these as good opportunities to learn; foreigner Japanese is often easier to understand than native Japanese as it tends to be simpler and slower. Don't let others intimidate you.

There's usually one bore in the class who'll drone on forever if not stopped. Don't rely on your teacher to give everyone equal talking time. Fight for your share of the conversation. Make sure the bore is you! :-)

Less is more
It's better to know a few useful grammatical constructions well than to half-know many. There are many ways to say "I have to do something" in Japanese; you only need one. The essential ones are all covered in this guide. Do master the simpler ones before moving on to the more complicated ones.

One thing to accept is that it is very difficult to translate accurately from English to Japanese. If you are having trouble, think how you could re-phrase what you want to say in English without losing the meaning. You must learn how to use the grammar you know to express a range of concepts, especially in the beginning.

Tips on starting a conversation
Japanese people can get a bit jumpy if a random foreigner starts speaking to them in public. In general, they are not confident in their English and have a terror of being accosted in English and made to look stupid in front of others. Yes, I know we want to speak to people in Japanese but (unless you are of Asian descent) the tendency will be for people to assume you are going to speak to them in English and panic. As a result it's a good tactic to make your first words simple and to pronounce them well. Creating a good impression at

the start of a conversation discourages people from trying to speak English to you.

Some people will try and start conversations with you in English. Some will start talking in Japanese and switch to English once you start replying. It's really up to you how you handle it but you don't want to be giving out free English lessons every time you get on the train. Insist on continuing you half of the conversation in Japanese, no matter how slowly. You could always feign being poor at English. My friend and I would often talk in pig Latin or complete nonsense when people were bothering us.

Get out of jail free

I once overheard a cunning linguist say that you need to use a word 40 times before you learn it. I've no idea where she came up with that figure but it is true that using new words in conversation will help reinforce them in your mind. However, it is almost inevitable that you will forget a word you want to say or want to say a word you don't know. There are several ways to get around this and mastering them will help you avoid grinding to an embarrassing halt mid-flow.

Filler phrases		
Oh what was the word?	I forgot the word.	Wait a moment.
Describing		
It's a big grey animal	It has a long nose	It lives in Africa.
It's the opposite of heavy.		
It's something you use to write with.		
It's not a pen.		
It's a book for studying Japanese.		
Questions		
How do you say "…" in Japanese?		
Gestures		
It's about this big (spreads hands).		
It looks like this (does elephant impression).		

There are a couple of games that are good for developing these skills where players try to explain words without saying the actual word.

Troubleshooting

If you do run into problems making yourself understood in Japanese make sure you are pronouncing the words correctly. Japanese are quite particular about pronunciation, especially long/short vowel sounds, and what sounds fine to you may be incomprehensible to them.

Also, while Japanese takes some words from English, it doesn't mean that you can say those words as you would in English and be understood. Pronounce them using the Japanese syllables e.g. salad -> *sarada*. See the next chapter for more tips on pronunciation.

As I said in the section on vocabulary, you must be careful to understand the nuances of the words you are using. If you are not getting your point across, there may be some difference in usage between the Japanese and English equivalent. For example, *mizu* in Japanese means water, however, it is only used to refer to cold water. The word for hot water is *oyu*.

Slang

The use of slang and rude words in Japanese in an effort to sound more like a native will often backfire on you. These are very context dependent and correct use is a high-level skill. I met a few Japanese who went to learn English abroad and came back sounding like pirates. Not a good impression. It will be more useful and more impressive if you can master the polite language forms and explain your thoughts clearly.

Practice

In the end, regular speaking practice is essential if you want to improve. Don't forget to do your reading and study at home though. If you don't, your progress will be a lot slower. Oh and remember that talking to oneself in public places is considered strange.

Writing

In all honesty, writing Japanese is hard. However, it can be done. Writing by hand is the most difficult and requires a thorough mastery of *kanji*.

In today's world, the ability to write Japanese by hand is not as useful as it was. If you have a Japanese mobile phone, you can use the messaging function to remind you of *kanji* you have forgotten (don't try this in an exam). Writing on a computer with the aid of a dictionary is less difficult as the computer will select the *kanji* for you (to a certain extent). I explain how to learn to write Japanese here.

At this point, we have covered some of the main things you need to know before starting to study Japanese. Everyone is different and you are only limited by your energy and creativity. Find or invent the study methods that work for you. Do not lose sight of your goals. I believe anyone who has attained fluency in their own language can attain fluency in Japanese within a reasonable length of time if they so desire. Doing so will almost certainly change your life for the better. Good luck!

Perfecting pronunciation

Vowel sounds
Japanese has only five vowel sounds which do not change. Listen to them here.

A – Cat, attack. Not father
I – See. Not I.
U – Who, you. Not umbrella.
E – Egg.
O – Hot, con. Not open.

Here are all the Japanese syllables (*go juu on* – 50 sounds). It's worth printing this table out and sticking it on your wall somewhere where you can see it.

Check out the accompanying sound files.

Just to note, both *hiragana* and *katakana* represent the same sounds; *hiragana* are used for Japanese words and *katakana* are used for foreign loan words (*gairaigo*). For more insight into the *kana*, check out Wikipedia on *hiragana* and *katakana*.

It is important to familiarise yourself with the layout and order of the *kana* table even if you do not intend to learn the *kana*. There are five columns based on the five vowel sounds of Japanese. Most rows will contain five sounds. Japanese is generally "alphabetised" according to the *kana* table layout.

Thinking in syllables
Understanding the *kana* table will also get you thinking in syllables which will help your Japanese greatly. It's quite an easy concept to understand when you start using *kana* as usually one character represents one syllable, however, for those who write Japanese in *romaji* this may not be immediately clear.

Thinking in syllables helps to keep your pronunciation even and flat and also makes conjugating Japanese verbs and adjectives much easier.

Sounds
You may notice that there aren't really all that many different sounds. English speakers should be able to pronounce all of them without too much difficulty.

One sound that may require practice is the *tsu*. Make sure that you can differentiate it from the *su* sound.

The Japanese *r* sound should be fine pronounced as an r but it is actually a blend of l and r which explains the difficulty some Japanese people have with those sounds.

The *chi*, *shi* and *fu* sounds are also worthy of note because they don't quite fit the usual pattern (you would expect them to be ti, si and hu).

The *nn* sound is the only non-vowel sound. You may see it romanized as *n* or *m*.

Small *tsu*
One point that needs explaining is the small *tsu* character. The small *tsu* has the effect of doubling up the following consonant which results in words like *atta*.

Dots and circles
You will see two dots in the top right hand corner of some of the characters looking much like an English apostrophe. This mark is usually called a *ten ten*, literally dot dot, and it changes the pronunciation of the characters as follows:

- Syllable from the k row + *ten ten* = equivalent syllable from the g row.
- Syllable from the s row + *ten ten* = equivalent syllable from the z row (note there is no zi, just a *ji*).

- Syllable from the t row + *ten ten* = equivalent syllable from the d row (note there is no di or du, only a *ji* and a *zu*).

The small circle (*maru*) in the top right has a similar effect on pronunciation.

- Syllable from the h row + circle = equivalent syllable from the p row.

Mnemonic: imagine the circle makes the character “happy” and you should find it easy to remember the h to p change.

These sounds produced by the dots and circles are known as *dakuon* and *handakuon* respectively.

Combined syllables
The characters *ya*, *yu* and *yo* also appear as smaller versions of themselves and combine with other syllables to form new syllables as follows. You have seen all these characters before in the main chart so there is no need to panic.

Syllable counting
Now you’ve digested that information see if you can count how many syllables there are in the following words. Check the answers at the end of this chapter.

Au	to meet
Shimasu	to do (polite)
Wasurechatta	ended up forgetting

Su
The final part of the *su* syllable is sometimes omitted in speech. This is often applied to common words like *desu*, pronounced “dess” and the polite ending *-masu*, pronounced “mass”.

Ha* and *he
The topic particle *wa* is written with the character for *ha*. Thus the *ha* character is usually pronounced *wa* unless it is part of a word.
The particle *e* is written with the character *he* but pronounced *e*.

Common mistakes
Most of the common mistakes come from not knowing the correct pronunciation of the vowels and not separating the syllables. English spelling rules do not apply to Japanese. For example, the word *made* is not pronounced as the English, but as two separate syllables, “mah-deh”.

One difficulty for English is long and short vowel sounds which can completely alter the meaning of a word. This is something you are going to have to pay close attention to. Mistakes can be embarrassing, as in the probably apocryphal story of the American who, whilst trying to introduce himself as *Sumisu san no komon* (Mr Smith's adviser), actually introduces himself as *Sumisu san no koumon* (Mr Smith's anus).

Other easily confused words include (but are by no means limited to) *joushi* (boss) and *joshi* (woman), *shujin* (husband) and *shuujin* (prisoner).

Intonation
Intonation is a huge part of making your Japanese understandable. Try to pronounce everything as flatly as possible and give equal time and weight to each syllable. The best way to develop your intonation is to listen and repeat real Japanese from a CD or similar. Another good drill, called shadowing, involves speaking the Japanese words or sentence at the same time as the CD.

Noting where the particles are can make your Japanese pronunciation much better. Think of them as pause indicators that tell you when you can take a breath while speaking.

For example, look at these two sentences. Sentence 1 sounds much more natural than sentence 2.

- *Watashi **ha**... nihonjin **no** tomodachi **ni**... eigo **wo**... oshiete iru.*
- *Watashi... **ha** nihonjin... **no** tomodachi... **ni** eigo... **wo** oshiete iru.*

Literally translated, the above means, "I (topic) Japanese (belonging particle) friend (to) English language (object particle) teaching." More naturally translated, "I'm teaching my Japanese friend English."

As a Japanese learner, you will definitely need to pause while constructing sentences in your head and learning the correct time to pause to think will be invaluable.

Homonyms
Japanese contains a large number of homonyms (*douonigigo*). Homonyms are words that sound the same but have different meanings e.g. blue/blew, lead/led etc. These can be distinguished either by context or by their *kanji* in the written form. Some words can have up to ten homonyms. An interesting sight in Japan is watching one person draw a *kanji* in the air to explain a word to another person.

Pronunciation practice
The king of all pronunciation drills has got to be the simple "listen and repeat". You can use a CD or a live teacher to help you.

- Stick with Japanese sentences that you can comfortably repeat at first.
- Pay close attention to the intonation, the weight given to each syllable and where the pauses come.
- Make sure to get feedback from your teacher about any words or sounds you have difficulty with.

Good pronunciation is not something that will come overnight but it can be improved so stick with it.

A variant on this drill is called shadowing. Here, you attempt to speak along with the CD you are listening to. You will need a script for this and it is quite difficult. It's definitely worth giving it a go.

If you are having trouble memorising or repeating long sentences one tip is to start at the end and work backwards. For example:
...ikimasu.
...gakkou ni ikimasu.
...kuruma de gakkou ni ikimasu.
...tomodachi no kuruma de gakkou ni ikimasu.
...mainichi tomodachi no kuruma de gakkou ni ikimasu.
...Watashi ha mainichi tomodachi no kuruma de gakkou ni ikimasu.
(As for me/every day/friend's car/by/school/to/go.)

By doing this, you can build up to quite long sentences a little more easily than you would starting from the beginning.

To a beginner, native speaker speed Japanese can sound extremely fast. One trick I picked up to make it more manageable was to use my PC to slow it down. You can do this with a free program called Audacity. Audacity allows you to import audio files from CD or tape or even record straight onto a microphone. The files can then be slowed down (or speeded up) as desired using the "change tempo" function.

Other language learning tricks you can do with Audacity include adding periods of silence to a track to give yourself time to repeat sentences and recording Japanese with your own voice. I recorded many of the idioms in Japanese Idioms onto mp3 files myself for listening practice.

At the close of this chapter I would like to impress upon you the importance of developing good pronunciation as early as possible. The Japanese are much more picky about how their language is pronounced than English speakers are. It's possible this is due to the fact English speakers get more exposure to foreign accents or it could be something that is inherent to Japanese (or both).

Good pronunciation covers a multitude of sins and will make your Japanese seem much better than it

actually is. On the other hand, even someone with an extensive knowledge of grammar and vocabulary will sound awful if their pronunciation is poor.

Answers to syllable counting quiz

Au	to meet	2
Shimasu	to do (polite)	3
Wasurechatta	ended up forgetting	5

Writing right

This chapter will actually cover both reading and writing as they are obviously closely intertwined.

When learning to read and write Japanese you should learn in this order: *katakana*, *hiragana* and *kanji*.

By learning *katakana* you will be able to understand many English loan words*. Katakana* are simpler and more angular than the *hiragana.*

Hiragana are necessary to start understanding Japanese and you can write Japanese entirely in *hiragana* if you do not understand *kanji. Hiragana* have a more rounded and flowing shape.

Kanji are the hardest to master and should be left until you have fully mastered the *kana.* The sooner you can move away from the crutch of *romaji* (Roman letters) the better.

Stroke order
Both *kana* and *kanji* have a designated stroke order (*kakijun*). It's quite tempting for an English speaker to ignore correct stroke order, reasoning that it doesn't matter if the characters look OK and that learning the characters is hard enough without worrying about stroke order. Don't give in to temptation! Stroke order is very important and you are shooting yourself in the foot if you ignore it.

Correct stroke order will help make your handwriting legible and becomes quite intuitive after a while. The basic rule is to start in the top left corner and finish in the bottom right hand corner. There are rules for drawing boxes and other common shapes. Wikipedia has a nice explanation of stroke order here.

If you know the number of strokes in a *kanji*, you will be able to look it up in a dictionary without knowing the pronunciation or the reading. To be able to count the strokes it is essential to have a solid grasp of correct stroke order. If you don't know the stroke order for a character, check it in your dictionary or online. Once again, stroke order is important so get into good habits from the start.

Learning the *kana*
It is possible to learn the *kana* (*hiragana* and *katakana*) through brute memory in a fortnight or so simply by writing them out over and over again but I really don't recommend doing this. As we have seen, the *kana* have only one pronunciation each. They have no inherent meaning like *kanji* and are only used to represent the sounds of Japanese.

Flashcards
Several publishers produce some rather good mnemonic cards for the *kana* and using these should save you time as well as aiding your retention. Try Kana Flashcards. Free printable *kana* flashcards can be downloaded from here, however, these cards do not come with mnemonics or stroke order. You can try making your own; e.g. the character *ki* looks like a key, the character *ma* looks like a mast etc.

It's a good idea to follow the *kana* table and review each row before going on to the next one i.e. start with *a, i, u, e, o* and go on to *ka, ki, ku, ke, ko* and so on. You could even try learning *katakana* and *hiragana* simultaneously as some of the shapes are similar and some flashcards come with both on them. If this confuses you, learn them separately.

Once you think you've mastered them try writing out the 2 sets. *a, i, u, e, o, ka, ki, ku, ke, ko* etc. Go back and pay special attention to the ones you forget.

A nice trick I found was to write out the *kana* on the palm of my hand using my finger when I had a spare moment. This can be done almost anywhere and is great for queues, train journeys, time when you should really be working etc.

Installing Japanese fonts on your computer
Once you start learning to write Japanese, you may find it helpful to install a Japanese font onto your

computer. Windows comes with Japanese on the original CDs. The Japanese language interface is called IME.

Declan's guide is quite helpful in explaining how to install Japanese.

With Japanese installed, you will now be able to write emails in *hiragana* and *katakana*, visit Japanese language websites and use the various online translation/dictionary programs.

Another option for those who want to write Japanese is a web based IME program. This allows you to convert input Japanese text via the web and then copy and paste it wherever you need. One can be found here. Simply click the IME on/off button to switch between *romaji* and Japanese.

One final note about the *kana*, don't panic if you forget one or two sometimes. They will sink in with regular practice. Use your mnemonics and flashcards and keep at it. A little effort to read and review them each day will go a long way.

Learning *Kanji*
Kanji literally translates as *kan* – Chinese and *ji* – characters (remember *romaji* – roman letters). There are 1945 *kanji* designated for general use (*Jouyou kanji*) in Japan following reforms carried out in 1946 aimed at simplifying *kanji* learning and making it easier to read literature and newspapers.

Despite these reforms, non-general use *kanji* are still in circulation although they may be given *furigana* (small *hiragana* found above *kanji* denoting their pronunciation).

Learning *kanji* is probably the biggest hurdle in mastering Japanese and it is one that many fall at. Unlike Chinese people, who grow up using *kanji,* English speakers must learn all 1945 *kanji* from scratch.

Kanji vary in complexity and can contain from one to twenty or more strokes (*utsu*, meaning depression, has a mammoth 29). Some *kanji* have several pronunciations depending on where and how they are used. Many books have been written on the subject of *kanji* learning, both for foreigners and for the Japanese themselves.

How many *kanji* do I need?
Learn about 1000 of the most common *kanji* and you will start to be able to make sense of real Japanese. Bear in mind that the *kanji* must not only be learnt individually but also together in compound words.

Learn all the everyday use *kanji* and develop a vocabulary of about 10,000 words and you should be able to read newspaper articles and pass the highest level of the Japanese Language Proficiency test.

Approaches to learning *kanji*
We know that learning *kanji* can be a daunting task. Japanese people grow up surrounded by *kanji* as well as studying them at school and even they will admit that *kanji* are difficult. The increasing use of computers means that many struggle to write *kanji* by hand.

So if the Japanese themselves find *kanji* difficult, what chance does an English speaker have of learning them? Well, you might be surprised. The key is adopting an efficient learning method. Traditionally, the Japanese have always learned *kanji* by writing them out again and again on pieces of paper.

This, in my opinion, is an awful way to learn. One Japanese teacher recommended this to me once. I asked him if it was a good way to learn. He thought about it and replied that he often forgets *kanji*! If sheer, crushing boredom and poor results are your thing, this method will suit you down to the ground. Fortunately, as logical adults, we have other options.

Component analysis AKA the fast track
Kanji are composed of building blocks called radicals. These radicals can have meanings of their own or we can assign them arbitrary meanings to make them easier to remember. Highly complex *kanji* can be easily

remembered by breaking them down into their constituent radicals and linking them together with a mnemonic phrase and image.

Mary Sisk Noguchi calls this the component analysis method. Heisig's excellent Remembering the Kanji is based entirely on component analysis and mnemonics. The first part of his book is available for free download on line and is essential reading for anyone interested in *kanji.*

Let's look at an example of component analysis. Once you have learned the simple shapes that mean “woman” 女 and “child" 子 you will be able to join them together to form the more complicated *kanji* meaning “like” 好. Using the simple mnemonic “women like children” it should be no problem to remember this one.

I and my Japanese learning friends used the Kanji Study Cards that accompany James Heisig’s work and were quite successful using his method. You could make your own cards but I do not recommend it. There are better ways to spend your time.

There are free cards available for download from the net here, obviously these will require a lot of printing and cutting (not to mention card). They are not quite as good as the boxed set which is still well worth the investment in my opinion. Once you have your cards, you will need to review the *kanji* daily. This is not difficult as 100 cards can easily be slipped into a pocket for study on the train or whenever you have a spare minute.

Using the internet
There are several websites offering flashcard programs to test your *kanji.* I personally don't think they are superior to hand held cards but the more computer literate among you might find them useful.

King Kanji is a neat little program available for the pocket pc to help you learn *kanji.* I did buy this and found it helpful although the majority of my *kanji* learning was done with flashcards.

Kanji Coffee is a site supporting students of Heisig's Remembering the Kanji. The forums are worth checking out as well.

Learning the pronunciations
Kanji often have two (or more) different pronunciations: the *on yomi*, or Chinese reading, and the *kun yomi*, or Japanese reading.

A single *kanji* can have more than one *on yomi* and/or *kun yomi*.

Single *kanji* followed by *hiragana* (*okurigana*) are usually read as their *kun yomi*.

Two *kanji* words are usually read “*on on*” but sometimes “*kun kun*”

Knowing the radical of a *kanji* can often give you a clue as to the *on yomi*.

The same word can often be expressed with more than one *kanji*, sometimes with subtle differences in meaning. The verb *hakaru*, to measure, can be written with six different *kanji*!

James Heisig’s second book, Remembering the Kanji 2, offers short cuts to mastery of *kanji* pronunciation by organising the *kanji* into logical groups that can be quickly learned together. The book can be used with his first book or in conjunction with other methods.

The Kanji Study Cards mentioned above can also be used to memorise *kanji* pronunciations. When learning to write the *kanji*, you will go from the English keyword that best describes the *kanji* to the writing. When learning to read and pronounce the *kanji* you will start on the other side of the card and go from a picture of the *kanji* to its reading.

Visit our website!

***Kanji* town**
Kanji town refers to a sophisticated method of learning *kanji* pronunciations. Students create for themselves an imaginary town comprised of different locations. Each location corresponds to a particular *on-yomi*. Each location will have its own story, dreamt up by the student, which includes all the *kanji* that share that particular *on-yomi*.

Let's take the *on-yomi "shuu"*. *Kanji* that share this reading include collection, week, protect, hand, bad smell and many more. Say I select the shoe (*shuu*) store in my *kanji* town as the location for this reading my story might go something like this:

Every week a large collection of shoes is brought to the store. The shoes replace the bad smelling shoes which must be kept under protection so that no-one touches them with their hands.

This is just a very brief example of the learning method. With different locations for characters with very similar pronunciation e.g. s*huu* and *shu* even these can be easily differentiated. Learning these via brute memory is difficult. Hopefully, you can see how *kanji* town makes learning *kanji* pronunciations a lot of fun. You are really only limited by your imagination.

***Kanji* game**
A neat game to test your *kanji* knowledge with a friend or Japanese person is to choose a radical and write as many *kanji* as possible using that radical. Once you get good at this, you can start to hustle Japanese people (some of them will not be amused to lose to a foreigner).

Buying a *kanji* dictionary
A good *kanji* dictionary will help your study a great deal. I personally like Hadamitzky and Spahn's The Learner's Kanji Dictionary which should last you throughout your *kanji* learning career.

There are numerous electronic dictionaries available on the market in Japan; however, most are aimed at Japanese people and thus could be quite tricky for a beginner student to use. When looking up the Japanese for an English word, the explanations will be entirely in Japanese. Most dictionaries have a jump function which allows you to quickly find the meaning of any unknown *kanji* which helps somewhat. Once I bought an electronic dictionary I wondered how I'd ever managed without one.

One great function most dictionaries have is a notebook that allows you to store and review interesting words. Mine holds up to 1,000 words and soon gets filled up.

Prices for electronic dictionaries vary depending on the features. More expensive is not necessarily better. I have seen expensive dictionaries that give very strange and convoluted examples. It's worth trying them out or at least reading online reviews before you buy one. One tip: don't spill your drink on your dictionary, they work much better when kept dry.

Starting to read
Once you have a decent grasp of *kanji* it's time to go out into the world of real Japanese. As we noted with listening, you want to be reading material that is just about comprehensible or a little beyond your capabilities. Too easy is almost as bad as too hard. Bearing this in mind, there are a lot of ways you can get started.

The major English newspapers carry regular columns for English speaking students of Japanese. The Japan Times page carries a short article with explanations of the vocabulary and an English translation. The Daily Yomiuri runs fairly easy translation competitions (although some of the winning entries from Japanese people can be a bit suspect). It's well worth taking the time to cut these out and store them in a folder for study. There are several good books on the market for beginner readers.

Breaking into Japanese Literature is a fantastic book for those who want to improve their reading. It contains short stories from famous literary authors like Natsume Soseki. MP3 files of the stories are even available for free download from the internet here.

Kanji from the Start is another book for those who want to start reading. It provides increasingly more difficult reading passages together with grammar notes and *kanji* explanations. It seems to be aimed at budding translators rather than novices and becomes hard very quickly.

I picked up the Harry Potter books in Japanese for around a thousand yen from my local second hand book store (second hand book stores like Book-Off and Geo are a great source of cheap books - often you can find cheap versions of well-known English novels for a couple of hundred yen). Knowing the story in English is a great help. It took me a year to read the first book, six months to read the second and a month to read the third. I feel confident that you can beat my times if you try!

Bear in mind that by reading Harry Potter you will learn a lot of specialised vocabulary that probably won't be much use to you in everyday life (unless you're a wizard). Harry Potter is not for everyone and I do recommend that you read things you are interested in. If you like sports, read about sports. Reading should be fun and interesting and not a grinding chore. Sadly the reading comprehension passages in Japanese exams are often frightfully dull.

Two final tips for reading. First, try to set yourself a realistic goal for finishing your book. A 600 page novel will take you a month if you read 20 pages a day. Second, don't be afraid to write on your book in pencil. Doing so will make it easy to review words you looked up earlier.

Audio Books
Audio books are great for the language learner. I highly recommend the Japanese audio books that accompany the Harry Potter series. There are several audio books available for download on the net.

Free audio book list.

I recommend you download these quickly and store them for later even if you feel they are too advanced for you at the moment. Free books and mp3s are not to be passed up!

More reading on the web
There are plenty of websites out there in Japanese to provide you with reading material. Jim Breen's Japanese Dictionary is an invaluable resource to any student of Japanese. Just copy and paste words from a website or file into the Translate words from Japanese function and it will provide you with the meanings of all the *kanji*!

Another site worthy of mention is rikai.com, which provides definitions of words as you move your cursor over them.

ALC is another great dictionary for translators and provides lots of example sentences and phrases to help you understand.

Armed with these sites, you are ready to tackle Japanese websites! I suggest you start with news sites and topics that interest you. My interest is mixed martial arts so I visit sites related to that topic.

The Japanese version of Wikipedia has daily news articles. Run them through Jim Breen's translate words function, copy and paste them and you can start to build up a collection of articles to review. It won't take you long to get used to reading the news in Japanese.

Japanese tests
There are several Japanese language tests you can take as a foreigner. Reasons for taking a test can vary: some want a qualification to put on their CV, others like the added motivation of preparing for a test. Tests are not the be-all and end-all of language learning and should not be viewed as such. I've met many people with very good Japanese who have never taken any kind of test.

JLPT
The most well-known Japanese test (at least among foreigners) is the Japanese language proficiency test. Great introduction to the JLPT

JLPT FAQ
The JLPT is divided into 4 levels of which 4 is the easiest and 1 is the hardest. Level 1 (*ikkyuu*) has been described as the holy grail for learners of Japanese. This is a bit of a stretch in my opinion but the test can be a good motivator and indicator of progress.

Study at a medium pace and you should be able to pass *ikkyuu* within four years. I have seen a dedicated student fail it by less than one percent after studying for two years and pass it comfortably in three.

Passing level 1 or 2 is quite respectable. Whilst the JLPT is a nice qualification to have on your CV it is certainly no guarantee of a job. Those with other marketable skills on their CVs, e.g. computer programming, may find the JLPT opens new doors for them.

Criticism of the JLPT includes the fact that it's only held once a year, it's expensive (around 7-8 thousand yen), it's all multiple choice (or multiple guess, depending on how hard you studied) and they don't send you the results until March (the test is held in December).

If you do take it in Japan, the subway is sure to be packed with foreigners which can be an amusing sight. Make sure you buy your return ticket on the way there and avoid the rush on the way back.

J-test
The J-test is another test gaining popularity in Japan. Think of it as a cheap and cheerful version of the JLPT. It's definitely good practice for anyone thinking of taking the JLPT level 1 or 2. The sections tend to start off quite easy but become progressively harder throughout.

Unlike the JLPT, you will actually have to write some Japanese (rather than simply select multiple choice answers) as there is a writing section at the end. The test also has a rather tricky sentence building section at the end.

The J-test isn't especially well-known but it will give you a good idea where you stand in relation to the JLPT (I got 723/1000 on the J-test the year I passed the JLPT 1 with 71%).

***Kanji* test**
One of the problems with the JLPT is that most Japanese people know next to nothing about it. I have been to a job interview for a translator position that required applicants to hold either JLPT 1 or 2 (I had the 1) only to be asked if I could read *kanji*!

Most English speakers wouldn't have a clue about the significance of a TOEIC score and it is the same with Japanese people and the JLPT et al. The Japanese do know about the *kanji kentei* (*kanken*) and most of them will have taken it at some point in their lives. Accordingly, taking and passing the *kanji kentei* will grant you instant kudos with Japanese people.

I hope that this chapter has given you some insight as to how to tackle learning to read and write in Japanese. Attaining literacy in Japanese brings a real feeling of achievement and I believe that anyone with a positive attitude and some spare time can learn to read books in Japanese. Besides, think of all the fun you'll have reading the crazy *kanji* tattoos illiterate westerners are so fond of.

Book Reviews

In this chapter I will discuss some of the more popular books out there to help you learn Japanese.

Buy any book from these links and I will send you the mp3 files to accompany the free flashcards on my website. Simply email sprstrikesback@hotmail.com with the name of the book you purchased. Check my website for more special offers!

Textbooks

Japanese for Busy People
Romaji version
This is a very popular textbook but I can't help feeling that its success is down to the catchy title rather than any particular superiority over its rivals. Who among us is not busy? If you can look through it, by all means do so, but you should not be spending too much time with a book like this. Read it and move on, and when the rest of your *gaijin* classmates are plodding through this at a chapter a week, you should be focusing on *kanji* acquisition or expanding your vocabulary.

Japanese for Busy People
Kana version
Same as the above but with *kana* rather than *romaji* which is a step in the right direction.

Minna no Nihongo
Another commonly used textbook which translates as “Japanese for Everyone”. It's a decent book but you'll want to get through it as fast as possible. One chapter a week is too slow. Most of the volunteer run classes I attended gave out free photocopies of this textbook so you'll probably end up using this at some point anyway if you live in Japan.

Genki I
This is a decent textbook for beginners. It quickly moves from *romaji* to *kana* and covers some basic *kanji*. It is designed for use in a classroom setting under a teacher. There are other books more suited to self study. In addition, the CD containing the listening exercises comes separately with the teacher set. It doesn't offer any special method for learning *kanji* other than writing them out again and again but then, neither do the other commonly used texts.

Genki I Workbook
Practice your writing with this workbook designed to accompany Genki I. I personally think studying kanji via flashcards will probably be more beneficial than working through this book but if you like Genki you might like this.

Genki II
The follow up to Genki I, this book covers more grammar and *kanji* up to about JLPT 3 level. Again, it's more for classroom use.

Genki II Workbook
Practice writing the *kanji* and grammar you learned in Genki II.

Kana

Kana Flashcards
It is not strictly necessary to buy or even use flashcards to learn *kana* especially if you live in Japan, however, these will definitely help anyone who is struggling to master the *kana* and probably make the learning process more enjoyable. For those on a budget, make your own cards with a piece of paper and use your imagination to link the *kana* to recognizable shapes (e.g. the character *Ki* looks a key). Make sure you always follow the correct stroke order and doodle the *kana* with your fingers whenever you get a spare moment.

Kanji Dictionaries

The Learner's Kanji Dictionary
Highly recommended!!!
This is a great reference book. It lives up to the description on the back: “The ultimate desk reference for the student of Japanese”. It has all the *kanji* and compound words you will ever need. If you need a *kanji* reference book, buy this one, it's the best.

Kanji & Kana: A Handbook of the Japanese Writing System
By the same authors but nowhere near as comprehensive as The Learner's Kanji Dictionary.

Kanji

Remembering the Kanji: A Complete Course on How Not to Forget the Meaning and Writing of Japanese Characters
Highly recommended!!!
This is a very important book for anyone who wants to learn *kanji*. Even if you don't own a physical copy you should be familiar with the concepts inside. Part of it can be downloaded online and is essential reading. The book covers all 1945 of the general use *kanji* which is quite some feat; most other books don't come close to that number.
The book sometimes comes under criticism because it doesn't deal with *kanji* pronunciation but the author explains quite convincingly that his system works better when reading and writing are separated. Pronunciation is of course covered in the second volume of the series. The book even has its own yahoo newsgroup dedicated to it. Highly recommended.

Remembering the Kanji 2: A Systematic Guide to Reading the Japanese Characters
Highly recommended!!!
Heisig's first book only covered the writing of the *jouyou kanji*; this one covers the pronunciation. The *kanji* are arranged into groups with the same or similar pronunciations which makes learning much easier and faster. Well worth a look for those serious students of *kanji* even those who aren't fans of Heisig's first book. Learning the links between *kanji* components and pronunciations will even help you guess the pronunciations of unknown *kanji.*

Kanji Study Cards
HIghly recommended!!!
This is the complete boxed set of flashcards to accompany Heisig's Remembering the Kanji books. So why should you buy them?
While it is possible to make your own sets of *kana* flashcards, trying to make your own *kanji* flashcards is much more difficult and time consuming. Not only is the sheer number of *kanji* (1945) a problem, but the amount of information that needs to be included on the cards (*on-yomi*, *kun-yomi*, English meaning) is also an obstacle. In my opinion, time spent creating your own *kanji* cards could be better spent elsewhere (e.g. learning vocabulary). These are sturdy, well made cards that are a pleasure to use and likely to be better than anything you could make yourself.
As far as I know, no other flashcard set covers all 1945 of the *jouyou kanji.* This means that other sets of flashcards will not give you all the *kanji* you need to read newspapers or pass the JLPT level 1.
Nowadays there are many websites that offer free *kanji* flashcard programs. These are worth checking out although the major disadvantage is that you cannot simply pop your computer in your pocket and study on the train (with the exception of a pocket PC). These cards are portable and can easily be sorted into piles as needed.
It is perfectly possible to use these flashcards even if you do not own a copy of Heisig's books and in fact if you have to choose which to buy, book or flashcards, I recommend choosing the flashcards.
The downside is that this set is expensive. If you are serious about learning Japanese however, I guarantee it will be a worthwhile investment. I for one would not have passed the JLPT 1 without it.

Japanese Kanji Flashcards: The Complete Set of Kanji for Levels 3 & 4 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test: 1
I recommend Heisig's flashcard set for the serious student, however, there are other sets on the market. If Heisig's set is a bit too expensive you can test whether flashcard learning is for you with a smaller, cheaper set like this one. A set like this will help you reach beginner level goals like passing the JLPT levels 3 or 4 but

you will need more to reach higher levels.

Kanji Cards, Vol. 1 (Kanji Cards)
(448 Kanji Flashcards)
My main problem with these is the box labels the set “complete”. It's nothing of the kind, containing only 448 of the 1945 *jouyou kanji*. There is no corresponding textbook to go with these and they do not comprise part of a larger system as Heisig's cards do so be aware that it can be a little confusing to start with these and then go over to Heisig's system. However, it is a nice starter pack that will help you get into *kanji* learning and pass some of the lower level exams.

Kanji Cards, Vol. 2
(448 Kanji Flashcards)
Another 448 *kanji* cards from the makers of the above. If you can master set 1 and 2, you will definitely start to be able to make sense of real Japanese. It's obvious, but please start with set 1 before moving on to set 2!

Kanji Cards, Vol. 3
(512 Kanji Flashcards)
This third set would take your *kanji* skills to a fairly high level. If you're going to go this far however, you probably would have been better off using Heisig's cards from the beginning.

Kanji Pict-O-Graphix: Over 1,000 Japanese Kanji and Kana Mnemonics
This is a quirky little book that provides pictorial mnemonics for over 1000 *kanji*. The *kanji* are grouped by theme (often radical) e.g. people, numbers. I don't recommend it as a substitute for flashcard learning but it can make a nice supplement and can help with *kanji* that just don't seem to sink in.

Kanji from the Start
This book that provides increasingly more difficult reading passages together with grammar notes and *kanji* explanations. It seems to be aimed at budding translators rather than novices and becomes difficult very quickly. It provides no special way to memorise the *kanji* it introduces which is why I would recommend this book only as a supplement to your *kanji* studies.

Decoding Kanji: A Practical Approach to Learning Look-Alike Characters
This is a neat little book that may help you distinguish similar *kanji*. If you are already using a radical based mnemonic method like Heisig's and on a budget I would spend your money on another book.

Building Word Power in Japanese: Using Kanji Prefixes and Suffixes
Highly recommended!!!
The concept of this book is that learning common kanji prefixes and suffixes will significantly increase your vocabulary as the same kanji can be applied to many different words. The book contains many example sentences of a fairly complex nature which makes it an excellent book for intermediate and above level students. As far as I know, this is the only book dealing with this subject matter and as such I recommend it.

Let’s learn Kanji
There are plenty of books out there like this one that only teach a few hundred *kanji*. They are simply not worth buying in my opinion when there are so many better books you could be buying.

Grammar
Rita Lampkin Japanese Grammar
Highly recommended!!!
This is a great book for the beginner. Cheap and light, it covers all the basic points of grammar in *romaji* and will give you an overview of the language you'll be referring to for quite a while.

A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Grammar
Highly recommended!!!
This is a heavyweight grammar book which is reflected in the price. It's longer and more comprehensive than most other grammar books. It's good as a reference or for those who want to go a little deeper into the grammar. I don't recommend this one as highly as its partner, Dictionary of Intermediate Japanese Grammar, because I think that you will outgrow most of this book eventually. Having said that, it is a very solid book.

A Dictionary of Intermediate Japanese Grammar
Highly recommended!!!
This is another heavyweight grammar book. Each grammar point is covered in depth and there are several very useful appendices. An understanding of *kanji* is necessary for this book as some of the example sentences do not have *furigana*. There is no *romaji* in the book so it will sharpen your reading skills. A great reference book for intermediate to advanced students. I highly recommend this.

A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Sentence Patterns (Kodansha Dictionary)
I recommend Naoko Chino's books. She covers the basics well and in an easy to understand fashion with plenty of example sentences. This book will take you right up to about JLPT 3 level. My mother has this book and loves it.

Japanese Core Words and Phrases: Things You Can't Find in a Dictionary (Power Japanese Series) (Kodansha's Children's Classics)
This book breaks down some of the most important and elusive concepts of Japanese and illustrates them well with example sentences. Good for upper beginner to intermediate students.

Verbs
The Handbook of Japanese Verbs
Highly recommended!!!
Taeko Kamiya is another author I recommend. Like Naoko Chino, her books are easy to understand and logically set out to help you learn as fast as possible. This is a great book and should be required reading for all beginners. *Romaji* sentences are provided throughout. Highly recommended.

Japanese Verbs at a Glance (Power Japanese Series) (Kodansha's Children's Classics)
You won't go too far wrong with Naoko Chino. For verbs, I like Taeko Kamiya's book just a little more though.

Adjectives
The Handbook of Japanese Adjectives and Adverbs (Kodansha's Children's Classics)
Highly recommended!!!
Like its sister book, The Handbook of Japanese Verbs, this is a great book for beginners and lower intermediate students. It covers a great number of adjectives and adverbs, groups them together logically and shows you how to use them. Not as essential as The Handbook of Japanese Verbs for attaining fluency but still a very good book indeed.

Particles
The following four books are all fairly similar in style and content in my opinion. They all cover the main particles and provide plenty of example sentences. If you don't have a heavyweight grammar book I would recommend one of these.
A Dictionary of Japanese Particles
Sue Kawashima

All About Particles: A Handbook of Japanese Function Words
Naoko Chino

Japanese Particle Workbook Japanese Particle Workbook
Taeko Kamiya

How to Tell the Difference between Japanese Particles: Comparisons and Exercises
Naoko Chino

Miscellaneous
How to Sound Intelligent in Japanese: A Vocabulary Builder
Highly recommended!!!
Don't be put off by the title - this book is actually a very decent vocabulary builder and great for those who want to be able to discuss art or politics in Japanese. *Romaji* is provided throughout. This book is for intermediate students.

Breaking into Japanese Literature: Seven Modern Classics in Parallel Text
Highly recommended!!!
This one contains several stories from Japanese classic literature and has free downloadable mp3 files on the net to accompany it.

Japanese Idioms
Highly recommended!!!
Cheap and great! This awesome book contains over 2000 commonly used idioms arranged alphabetically with real Japanese and *romaji* sentences. This is a great book for intermediate level students – you won't need this until you reach a basic level of fluency.

Must See Movies!

Practice your Japanese with these classics of Japanese cinema!

Seven Samurai
Hailed as the greatest film in the history of Japanese cinema, *Seven Samurai* is director Akira Kurosawa's undisputed masterpiece.

Tampopo
Billed as "The first Japanese noodle western!" this highly regarded film is a quirky comedy about the search for the perfect noodle recipe.

Woman in the Dunes
Director Hiroshi Teshigahara was a 37-year-old novice when he made this film, which received Oscar nominations for Best Director and Best Foreign Language Film. With images and sequences that are hauntingly and unforgettably evocative, *Woman in the Dunes* remains a truly extraordinary work of cinematic art.

Kagemusha
Another great Kurosawa epic. Through stunning visuals and meticulous attention to every physical and stylistic detail, Kurosawa made a film that restored his status as Japan's greatest filmmaker.

Rashomon
This 1950 film by Akira Kurosawa is more than a classic: it's a cinematic archetype that has served as a template for many a film since. The cast, headed by Kurosawa's favorite actor, Toshiro Mifune, is superb.

A Taxing Woman
A Taxing Woman is the subtly hilarious tale of Ryoko, Tokyo's hardest working female tax inspector. The internationally acclaimed team of Nobuko Miyamoto and Tsutomu Yamazaki (stars of *Tampopo* and *The Funeral*) give performances in the best tradition of romantic farce, reminiscent of vintage Tracy and Hepburn.

Ran
Akira Kurosawa transposes Shakespeare's KING LEAR to feudal Japan. With its magnificent costumes, breathtaking settings, and amazingly photographed battle sequences, the film is truly stunning. An epic on the grandest of scales, RAN is not only one of Kurosawa's finest films, it is a glorious masterpiece of Japanese cinema.

Spirited Away
The highest grossing film in Japanese box-office history, Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* is a dazzling film that reasserts the power of drawn animation to create fantasy worlds. The result is a moving and magical journey, told with consummate skill by one of the masters of contemporary animation.

Howl's Moving Castle
Like a dream, *Howl's Moving Castle* carries audiences to vistas beyond their imaginations where they experience excitement, adventure, terror, humor, and romance. The film overflows with eclipsing visuals that range from frightening aerial battles to serene landscapes, and few recent features--animated or live action--offer as much magic as *Howl's Moving Castle*.

About the author
This ebook was authored by Simon Reynolds.

Simon spent 6 years living in Nagoya which he enjoyed very much despite the fact the place that rarely rates more than a page or two in even the thickest travel guides.

Simon is married to a beautiful Japanese lady called Yuka. They speak in a strange mix of Japanese and English.

Among Simon's hobbies are submission grappling, weightlifting and playing guitar.

This book is a mini version of a larger ebook.
“Japanese for Smart People”

If you liked this book, please show your appreciation by buying yourself a book or dvd from our Amazon store!

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