Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1   The problem with conventional textbooks

The problem with conventional textbooks is that they often have the following goals.

1. They want readers to be able to use functional and polite Japanese as quickly as possible.

2. They don't want to scare readers away with terrifying Japanese script and Chinese characters.

3. They want to teach you how to say English phrases in Japanese.

Traditionally with romance languages such as Spanish, these goals present no problems or are nonexistent due to the similarities to English. However, because Japanese is different in just about every way down to the fundamental ways of thinking, these goals create many of the confusing textbooks you see today. They are usually filled with complicated rules and countless number of grammar for specific English phrases. They also contain almost no Kanji and so when you finally arrive in Japan, lo and behold, you discover you can't read menus, maps, or essentially anything at all because the book decided you weren't smart enough to memorize Chinese characters.

The root of this problem lies in the fact that these textbooks try to teach you Japanese with English. They want to teach you on the first page how to say, "Hi, my name is Smith," but they don't tell you about all the arbitrary decisions that were made behind your back. They probably decided to use the polite form even though learning the polite form before the dictionary form makes no sense. They also might have decided to include the subject even though it's not necessary and omitted most of the time. In fact, the most common way to say something like "My name is Smith" in Japanese is to say "Smith". That's because most of the information is understood from the context and is therefore omitted. But does most textbooks explain the way things work in Japanese fundamentally? No, because they're too busy trying to push you out

the door with "useful" phrases right off the bat. The result is a confusing mess of "use this if you want to say this" type of text and the reader is left with a feeling of confusion about how things actually *work*.

The solution to this problem is to explain Japanese from a Japanese point of view. Take Japanese and explain how it works and forget about trying to force what you want to say in English into Japanese. To go along with this, it is also important to explain things in an order that makes sense in Japanese. If you need to know [A] in order to understand [B], don't cover [B] first just because you want to teach a certain phrase.

Essentially, what we need is a *Japanese* guide to learning Japanese grammar.

1.2   A Japanese guide to learning Japanese grammar

This guide is an attempt to systematically build up the grammatical structures that make up the Japanese language in a way that makes sense in Japanese. It may not be a practical tool for quickly learning immediately usable phrases such as for travel. However, it will logically create successive building blocks that will result in a solid grammatical foundation. For those of you who have learned Japanese from textbooks, you may see some big differences in how the material is ordered and presented. This is because this guide does not seek to forcibly create artificial ties between English and Japanese by presenting the material in a way that makes sense in English. Instead, examples with translations will show how ideas are expressed in Japanese resulting in simpler explanations that are easier to understand.

In the beginning, the English translations for the examples will also be as literal as possible to convey the Japanese sense of the meaning. This will often result in grammatically incorrect translations in English. For example, the translations might not have a subject because Japanese does not require one. In addition, since the articles "the" and "a" do not exist in Japanese, the translations will not have them as well. And since Japanese does not distinguish between a future action and a general statement (such as "I will go to the store" vs. "I go to the store"), no distinction will necessarily be made in the translation. It is my hope that the explanation of the examples will convey an accurate sense of what the sentences actually mean **in Japanese**. Once the reader becomes familiar and comfortable thinking in Japanese, the translations will be less literal in order to make the sentences more readable and focused on the more advanced topics.

Be aware that there are advantages and disadvantages to systematically building a grammatical foundation from the ground up. In Japanese, the most fundamental grammatical concepts are often the most difficult to truly understand. This means that the hardest part of the language will come first. Textbooks usually don't take this approach; afraid that this will scare away or frustrate those interested in the language. Instead, they try to delay going deeply into the hardest conjugation rules with patchwork and gimmicks so that they can start teaching useful expressions right away. This is a fine approach for some, however; it can create more confusion and trouble along the way, much like building a house on a poor foundation. The hard parts must be

covered no matter what. However, if you cover them in the beginning, the easier parts will be all that much easier because they'll fit nicely on top of the foundation you have built. Japanese is syntactically much more consistent than English. If you learn the hardest conjugation rules, most of remaining grammar builds upon similar or identical rules. The only difficult part from there on is sorting out and remembering all the various possible expressions and combinations in order to use them in the correct situations.

⬜Note: You will see half brackets like these: 「」 in the text. These are the Japanese version of quotation marks.

1.3 Suggestions

Here's my advice for practicing Japanese: if you find yourself trying to figure out how to say an English thought in Japanese, save yourself the trouble and stop because you won't get it right most of the time. You should always keep in mind that **if you don't know how to say it already, then you don't know how to say it.** Instead, if you can, ask someone how to say it in Japanese including a full explanation of the answer and start practicing **from Japanese**. Language is not a math problem; you don't have to figure out the answer. If you practice from the answer, you will develop good habits that will help you formulate correct and natural Japanese sentences.

This is why I'm a firm believer of learning by example. Examples and experience will be your main tools in mastering Japanese. Therefore, even if you don't understand something completely the first time, just move on and keep referring back as you see more examples. This will allow you to get a better sense of how it's used in many different contexts. Even this guide will not have all the examples to cover every situation. But lucky for you, Japanese is everywhere, especially on the web. I recommend practicing Japanese as much as possible and referring to this guide only when you cannot understand the grammar.

The Internet alone has a rich variety of reading materials including websites, bulletin boards, and online chat. Buying Japanese books or comic books is also an excellent (and fun) way to increase your vocabulary and practice reading skills. It's also important to keep in mind that it is impossible to learn good speaking and listening skills without actually conversing in Japanese. Practicing listening and speaking skills with fluent speakers of Japanese is a *must* if you wish to master conversational skills. While audio listening material can be very educational, there is nothing better than interacting with a real human for learning pronunciation, intonation, and natural conversation flow. If you have specific questions that are not addressed in this guide, you can ask them on my online forum at http://www.guidetojapanese.org/forum.

Don't feel discouraged by the vast amount of material that you will need to master. Remember that every new word or grammar learned is one step closer to mastering the language!

Chapter 2

The Writing System

2.1   The Scripts

Japanese consists of two scripts (referred to as *kana*) called *Hiragana* and *Katakana*, which are two versions of the same set of sounds in the language. Hiragana and Katakana consist of a little less than 50 "letters", which are actually simplified Chinese characters adopted to form a phonetic script.

Chinese characters, called *Kanji* in Japanese, are also heavily used in the Japanese writing. Most of the words in the Japanese written language are written in Kanji (nouns, verbs, adjectives). There exists over 40,000 Kanji where about 2,000 represent over 95% of characters actually used in written text. There are no spaces in Japanese so Kanji is necessary in distinguishing between separate words within a sentence. Kanji is also useful for discriminating between homophones, which occurs quite often given the limited number of distinct sounds in Japanese.

Hiragana is used mainly for grammatical purposes. We will see this as we learn about particles. Words with extremely difficult or rare Kanji, colloquial expressions, and onomatopoeias are also written in Hiragana. It's also often used for beginning Japanese students and children in place of Kanji they don't know.

While Katakana represents the same sounds as Hiragana, it is mainly used to represent newer words imported from western countries (since there are no Kanji associated with words based on the roman alphabet). The next three sections will cover Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji.

2.2 Intonation

As you will find out in the next section, every character in Hiragana (and the Katakana equivalent) corresponds to a [vowel] or [consonant + vowel] syllable sound with the single exception of the 「ん」 and 「ン」 characters (more on this later). This system of letter for each syllable sound makes pronunciation absolutely clear with no ambiguities. However, the simplicity of this system does not mean that pronunciation in Japanese is simple. In fact, the rigid structure of the fixed syllable sound in Japanese creates the challenge of learning proper intonation.

Intonation of high and low pitches is a crucial aspect of the spoken language. For example, homophones can have different pitches of low and high tones resulting in a slightly different sound despite sharing the same pronunciation. The biggest obstacle for obtaining proper and natural sounding speech is incorrect intonation. Many students often speak without paying attention to the correct enunciation of pitches making speech sound unnatural (the classic foreigner's accent). It is not practical to memorize or attempt to logically create rules for pitches, especially since it can change depending on the context or the dialect. The only practical approach is to get the general sense of pitches by mimicking native Japanese speakers with careful listening and practice.

2.3 Hiragana

Hiragana is the basic Japanese phonetic script. It represents every sound in the Japanese language. Therefore, you can theoretically write everything in Hiragana. However, because Japanese is written with no spaces, this will create nearly indecipherable text.

Here is a table of Hiragana and similar-sounding English consonant-vowel pronunciations. It is read up to down and right to left, which is how most Japanese books are written. In Japanese, writing the strokes in the correct order and direction is important, especially for Kanji. Because handwritten letters look slightly different from typed letters (just like how 'a' looks totally different when typed), you will want to use a resource that uses handwritten style fonts to show you how to write the characters (see below for links). I must also stress the importance of correctly learning how to pronounce each sound. Since every word in Japanese is composed of these sounds, learning an incorrect pronunciation for a letter can severely damage the very foundation on which your pronunciation lies.

Hiragana - Click for stroke order and sound											
n	**w**	**r**	**y**	**m**	**h**	**n**	**t**	**s**	**k**		
ん (n)	わ	ら	や	ま	は	な	た	さ	か	あ	**a**
	ゐ*	り		み	ひ	に	ち (chi)	し (shi)	き	い	**i**
		る	ゆ	む	ふ (fu)	ぬ	つ (tsu)	す	く	う	**u**
	ゑ*	れ		め	へ	ね	て	せ	け	え	**e**
	を (o)	ろ	よ	も	ほ	の	と	そ	こ	お	**o**

* = no longer used

You can listen to the pronunciation for each character by clicking on it in chart. If your browser doesn't support audio, you can also download them. There are also other free resources with audio samples.

Hiragana is not too tough to master or teach and as a result, there are a variety of web sites and free programs that are already available on the web. I also suggest recording yourself and comparing the sounds to make sure you're getting it right.

When practicing writing Hiragana by hand, the important thing to remember is that the stroke order and direction of the strokes matter. There, I underlined, italicized, bolded, and highlighted it to boot. Trust me, you'll eventually find out why when you read other people's hasty notes that are nothing more than chicken scrawls. The only thing that will help you is that everybody writes in the same order and so the "flow" of the characters is fairly consistent. I strongly recommend that you pay close attention to stroke order from the beginning starting with Hiragana to avoid falling into bad habits. While there are many tools online that aim to help you learn Hiragana, the best way to learn how to write it is the old fashioned way: a piece of paper and pen/pencil. Below are handy PDFs for Hiragana writing practice.

- Hiragana trace sheets

- japanese-lesson.com

- Hiroshi & Sakura

☐ As an aside, an old Japanese poem called 「いろは」 was often used as the base for ordering of Hiragana until recent times. The poem contains every single Hiragana character except for 「ん」 which probably did not exist at the time it was written. You can check out this poem for yourself in this wikipedia article. As the article mentions, this order is still sometimes used in ordering lists so you may want to spend some time checking it out.

> **Notes**
>
> 1. Except for 「し」、「ち」、「つ」、and 「ん」、you can get a sense of how each letter is pronounced by matching the consonant on the top row to the vowel. For example, 「き」would become / ki / and 「ゆ」 would become / yu / and so on.
>
> 2. As you can see, not all sounds match the way our consonant system works. As written in the table, 「ち」 is pronounced "chi" and 「つ」 is pronounced "tsu".
>
> 3. The / r / or / l / sound in Japanese is quite different from any sound in English. It involves more of a roll and a clip by hitting the roof of your mouth with your tongue. Pay careful attention to that whole column.
>
> 4. Pay careful attention to the difference between / tsu / and / su /.
>
> 5. The 「ん」 character is a special character because it is rarely used by itself and does not have a vowel sound. It is attached to another character to add a / n / sound. For example, 「かん」 becomes 'kan' instead of 'ka', 「まん」 becomes 'man' instead of 'ma', and so on and so forth.
>
> 6. <u>You must learn the correct stroke order and direction!</u> Use either of the following pdf practice sheets.
>
>   - Hiragana trace sheets
>   - japanese-lesson.com
>   - Hiroshi & Sakura

2.3.1 The Muddied Sounds

Once you memorize all the characters in Hiragana, there are still some additional sounds left to be learned. There are five more consonant sounds that are written by either affixing two tiny lines similar to a double quotation mark called *dakuten* (濁点) or a tiny circle called *handakuten* (半濁点). This essentially creates a "muddy" or less clipped version of the consonant (technically called a voiced consonant or 「濁り」, which literally means to become muddy).

All the voiced consonant sounds are shown in the table below.

Voiced Hiragana - Click for Sound					
p	**b**	**d**	**z**	**g**	
ぱ	ば	だ	ざ	が	**a**
ぴ	び	ぢ (ji)	じ (ji)	ぎ	**i**
ぷ	ぶ	づ (dzu)	ず	ぐ	**u**
ぺ	べ	で	ぜ	げ	**e**
ぽ	ぼ	ど	ぞ	ご	**o**

Note

- Notice that 「ぢ」 sounds essentially identical to 「じ」 and both are pronounced as / ji /, while 「づ」 is pronounced like / dzu /.

2.3.2   The Small 「や」、「ゆ」、and 「よ」

You can also combine a consonant with a / ya / yu / yo / sound by attaching a small 「や」、「ゆ」、or 「よ」 to the / i / vowel character of each consonant.

All small や、ゆ、and よ combinations in Hiragana - Click for Sound											
p	**b**	**j**	**g**	**r**	**m**	**h**	**n**	**c**	**s**	**k**	
ぴゃ	びゃ	じゃ	ぎゃ	りゃ	みゃ	ひゃ	にゃ	ちゃ	しゃ	きゃ	**ya**
ぴゅ	びゅ	じゅ	ぎゅ	りゅ	みゅ	ひゅ	にゅ	ちゅ	しゅ	きゅ	**yu**
ぴょ	びょ	じょ	ぎょ	りょ	みょ	ひょ	にょ	ちょ	しょ	きょ	**yo**

Notes

1. The above table is the same as before. Match the top consonants to the vowel sound on the right. Ex: きゃ = kya.

2. Also note that since 「じ」 is pronounced / ji /, all the small 「や」、「ゆ」、「よ」 sounds are also based off of that, namely: / jya / jyu / jyo /.

3. The same thing also applies to 「ち」 which becomes / cha / chu / cho / and 「し」 which becomes / sha / shu / sho /. (Though arguably, you can still think of it as / sya / syu / syo /.)

2.3.3 The Small 「つ」

A small 「つ」 is inserted between two characters to carry the consonant sound of the second character to the end of the first. For example, if you inserted a small 「つ」 between 「び」 and 「く」 to make 「びっく」, the / k / consonant sound is carried back to the end of the first character to produce "bikku". Similarly, 「はっぱ」 becomes "happa", 「ろっく」 becomes "rokku" and so on and so forth.

Examples

1. ざっし (zas-shi) - magazine

2. カップ (kap-pu) - cup

> **Notes**
>
> 1. A small 「つ」 is used to carry the consonant sound of the second character to the end of the first. Ex: 「がっき」 = "gakki".
>
> 2. The addition of another consonant almost always creates the characteristic clipping sound. But make sure you're clipping with the right consonant (the consonant of the second character).

2.3.4 The Long Vowel Sound

Whew! You're almost done. In this last portion, we will go over the long vowel sound which is simply extending the duration of a vowel sound. You can extend the vowel sound of a character by adding either 「あ」 、 「い」 、 or 「う」 depending on the vowel in accordance to the following chart.

Extending Vowel Sounds	
Vowel Sound	**Extended by**
/ a /	あ
/ i / e /	い
/ u / o /	う

For example, if you wanted to create an extended vowel sound from 「か」, you would add 「あ」 to create 「かあ」. Other examples would include: 「き → きい」, 「く → くう」, 「け

→ けい」，「こ → こう」，「さ → さあ」 and so on. The reasoning for this is quite simple. Try saying 「か」 and 「あ」 separately. Then say them in succession as fast as you can. You'll notice that soon enough, it sounds like you're dragging out the / ka / for a longer duration than just saying / ka / by itself. When pronouncing long vowel sounds, try to remember that they are really two sounds merged together.

It's important to make sure you hold the vowel sound long enough because you can be saying things like "here" (ここ) instead of "high school" (こうこう) or "middle-aged lady" (おばさん) instead of "grandmother" (おばあさん) if you don't stretch it out correctly!

Examples

1. がくせい (ga-ku-se) - student

2. せんせい (sen-se) - teacher

3. きょう (kyo) - today

4. おはよう (o-ha-yo) - good morning

5. おかあさん (o-ka-san) - mother

There are rare exceptions where an / e / vowel sound is extended by adding 「え」 or an / o / vowel sound is extended by 「お」. Some examples of this include 「おねえさん」、「おおい」、and 「おおきい」. Pay careful attention to these exceptions but don't worry, there aren't too many of them.

2.4 Katakana

As mentioned before, *Katakana* is mainly used for words imported from foreign languages. It can also be used to emphasize certain words similar to the function of *italics*. For a more complete list of usages, refer to the Wikipedia entry on katakana.

Katakana represents the same set of phonetic sounds as Hiragana except all the characters are different. Since foreign words must fit into this limited set of [consonants+vowel] sounds, they undergo many radical changes resulting in instances where English speakers can't understand words that are supposed to be derived from English! As a result, the use of Katakana is extremely difficult for English speakers because they expect English words to sound like... well... English. Instead, it is better to completely forget the original English word, and treat the word as an entirely separate Japanese word, otherwise you can run into the habit of saying English words with English pronunciations (whereupon a Japanese person may or may not understand what you are saying).

Katakana - Click for stroke order and sound											
n	**w**	**r**	**y**	**m**	**h**	**n**	**t**	**s**	**k**		
ン (n)	ワ	ラ	ヤ	マ	ハ	ナ	タ	サ	カ	ア	**a**
	ヰ*	リ		ミ	ヒ	ニ	チ (chi)	シ (shi)	キ	イ	**i**
		ル	ユ	ム	フ (fu)	ヌ	ツ (tsu)	ス	ク	ウ	**u**
	ヱ*	レ		メ	ヘ	ネ	テ	セ	ケ	エ	**e**
	ヲ* (o)	ロ	ヨ	モ	ホ	ノ	ト	ソ	コ	オ	**o**

* = obsolete or rarely used

Katakana is significantly tougher to master compared to Hiragana because it is only used for certain words and you don't get nearly as much practice as you do with Hiragana. To learn the proper stroke order (and yes, you need to), here are links to practice sheets for Katakana.

- Katakana trace sheets

- japanese-lesson.com

- Hiroshi & Sakura

Also, since Japanese doesn't have any spaces, sometimes the symbol 「・」 is used to show the spaces like 「ロック・アンド・ロール」 for "rock and roll". Using the symbol is completely optional so sometimes nothing will be used at all.

> **Notes**
>
> 1. All the sounds are identical to what they were for Hiragana.
>
> 2. As we will learn later,「を」is only ever used as a particle and all particles are in Hiragana. Therefore, you will almost never need to use 「ヲ」 and it can be safely ignored. (Unless you are reading very old telegrams or something.)
>
> 3. The four characters 「シ」、「ン」、「ツ」、and 「ソ」 are fiendishly similar to each other. Basically, the difference is that the first two are more "horizontal" than the second two. The little lines are slanted more horizontally and the long line is drawn in a curve from bottom to top. The second two have almost vertical little lines and the long line doesn't curve as much as it is drawn from top to bottom. It is almost like a slash while the former is more like an arc. These characters are hard to sort out and require some patience and practice.
>
> 4. The characters 「ノ」、「メ」、and 「ヌ」 are also something to pay careful attention to, as well as, 「フ」、「ワ」、 and 「ウ」. Yes, they all look very similar. No, I can't do anything about it.
>
> 5. You must learn the correct stroke order and direction! Use the following pdf practice sheets to practice.
>
>   • Katakana trace sheets
>   • japanese-lesson.com
>   • Hiroshi & Sakura
>
> 6. Sometimes 「・」 is used to denote what would be spaces in English.

2.4.1   The Long Vowel Sound

Long vowels have been radically simplified in Katakana. Instead of having to muck around thinking about vowel sounds, all long vowel sounds are denoted by a simple dash like so: ー.

Examples

1. ツアー (tsu-a) - tour

2. メール (me-ru) - email

3. ケーキ (ke-ki) - cake

Summary

- All long vowel sounds in Katakana are denoted by a dash. For example, "cute" would be written in Katakana like so: 「キュート」.

2.4.2   The Small 「ア、イ、ウ、エ、オ」

Due to the limitations of the sound set in Hiragana, some new combinations have been devised over the years to account for sounds that were not originally in Japanese. Most notable is the lack of the / ti / di / and / tu / du / sounds (because of the / chi / tsu / sounds), and the lack of the / f / consonant sound except for 「ふ」. The / sh / j / ch / consonants are also missing for the / e / vowel sound. The decision to resolve these deficiencies was to add small versions of the five vowel sounds. This has also been done for the / w / consonant sound to replace the obsolete characters. In addition, the convention of using the little double slashes on the 「ウ」 vowel (ヴ) with the small 「ア、イ、エ、オ」 to designate the / v / consonant has also been established but it's not often used probably due to the fact that Japanese people still have difficulty pronouncing / v /. For instance, while you may guess that "volume" would be pronounced with a / v / sound, the Japanese have opted for the easier to pronounce "bolume" (ボリューム). In the same way, vodka is written as "wokka" (ウォッカ) and not 「ヴォッカ」. You can write "violin" as either 「バイオリン」 or 「ヴァイオリン」. It really doesn't matter however because almost all Japanese people will pronounce it with a / b / sound anyway. The following table shows the added sounds that were lacking with a highlight. Other sounds that already existed are reused as appropriate.

Additional sounds								
v	**w**	**f**	**ch**	**d**	**t**	**j**	**sh**	
ヴァ	ワ	ファ	チャ	ダ	タ	ジャ	シャ	**a**
ヴィ	ウィ	フィ	チ	ディ	ティ	ジ	シ	**i**
ヴ	ウ	フ	チュ	ドゥ	トゥ	ジュ	シュ	**u**
ヴェ	ウェ	フェ	チェ	デ	テ	ジェ	シェ	**e**
ヴォ	ウォ	フォ	チョ	ド	ト	ジョ	ショ	**o**

Notes

1. Notice that there is no / wu / sound. For example, the Katakana for "woman" is written as "u-man" (ウーマン).

2. While the / tu / sound (as in "too") can technically be produced given the rules as 「トゥ」, foreign words that have become popular before these sounds were available simply used / tsu / to make do. For instance, "tool" is still 「ツール」 and "tour" is similarly still 「ツアー」.

3. Back in the old days, without these new sounds, there was no choice but to just take characters off the regular table without regard for actual pronunciation. On old buildings, you may still see 「ビルヂング」 instead of the modern spelling 「ビルディング」.

2.4.3 Some examples of words in Katakana

Translating English words into Japanese is a knack that requires quite a bit of practice and luck. To give you a sense of how English words become "Japanified", here are a few examples of words in Katakana. Sometimes the words in Katakana may not even be correct English or have a different meaning from the English word it's supposed to represent. Of course, not all Katakana words are derived from English.

Sample Katakana Words	
English	**Japanese**
America	アメリカ
Russia	ロシア
cheating	カンニング (cunning)
tour	ツアー
company employee	サラリーマン (salary man)
Mozart	モーツァルト
car horn	クラクション (klaxon)
sofa	ソファor ソファー
Halloween	ハロウィーン
French fries	フライドポテト (fried potato)

2.5 Kanji

2.5.1 What is Kanji?

In Japanese, nouns and stems of adjectives and verbs are almost all written in Chinese characters called *Kanji*. Adverbs are also fairly frequently written in Kanji as well. This means that you will need to learn Chinese characters to be able to read most of the words in the language. (Children's books or any other material where the audience is not expected to know a lot of Kanji is an exception to this.) Not all words are always written in Kanji however. For example, while the verb "to do" technically has a Kanji associated with it, it is always written in Hiragana.

This guide begins using Kanji from the beginning to help you read "real" Japanese as quickly as possible. Therefore, we will go over some properties of Kanji and discuss some strategies of learning it quickly and efficiently. Mastering Kanji is not easy but it is by no means impossible. The biggest part of the battle is mastering the skills of learning Kanji and time. In short, memorizing Kanji past short-term memory must be done with a great deal of study and, most importantly, for a long time. And by this, I don't mean studying five hours a day but rather reviewing how to write a Kanji once every several months until you are sure you have it down for good. This is another reason why this guide starts using Kanji right away. There is no reason to dump the huge job of learning Kanji at the advanced level. By studying Kanji along with new vocabulary from the beginning, the immense job of learning Kanji is divided into small manageable chunks and the extra time helps settle learned Kanji into permanent memory. In addition, this will help you learn new vocabulary, which will often have combinations of Kanji you already know. If you start learning Kanji later, this benefit will be wasted or reduced.

2.5.2 Learning Kanji

All the resources you need to begin learning Kanji are on the web for free. You can use dictionaries online such as Jim Breen's WWWJDIC or jisho.org. They both have great Kanji dictionaries and stroke order diagrams for most Kanji. Especially for those who are just starting to learn, you will want to repeatedly write out each Kanji to memorize the stroke order. Another important skill is learning how to balance the character so that certain parts are not too big or small. So make sure to copy the characters as close to the original as possible. Eventually, you will naturally develop a sense of the stroke order for certain types of characters allowing you to bypass the drilling stage. All the Kanji used in this guide can be easily looked up by copying and pasting to an online dictionary.

2.5.3   Reading Kanji

Almost every character has two different readings called 音読み (おんよみ) and 訓読み (くんよみ). 音読み is the original Chinese reading while 訓読み is the Japanese reading. Kanji that appear in a compound or 熟語 is usually read with 音読み while one Kanji by itself is usually read with 訓読み. For example,「力」(ちから) is read with the 訓読み while the same character in a compound word such as「能力」is read with the 音読み (which is「りょく」in this case).

Certain characters (especially the most common ones) can have more than one 音読み or 訓読み. For example, in the word「怪力」,「力」is read here as「りき」and not「りょく」. Certain compound words also have special readings that have nothing to do with the readings of the individual characters. These readings must be individually memorized. Thankfully, these readings are few and far in between.

訓読み is also used in adjectives and verbs in addition to the stand-alone characters. These words often have a string of kana (called okurigana) that come attached to the word. This is so that the reading of the Chinese character stays the same even when the word is conjugated to different forms. For example, the past form of the verb「食べる」is「食べた」. Even though the verb has changed, the reading for「食」remain untouched. (Imagine how difficult things could get if readings for Kanji changed with conjugation or even worse, if the Kanji itself changed.) Okurigana also serves to distinguish between intransitive and transitive verbs (more on this later).

Another concept that is difficult to grasp at first is that the actual readings of Kanji can change slightly in a compound word to make the word easier to say. The more common transformations include the / h / sounds changing to either / b / or / p / sounds or「つ」becoming「っ」. Examples include:「一本」、「徹底」、and「格好」.

Yet another fun aspect of Kanji you'll run into are words that practically mean the same thing and use the same reading but have different Kanji to make just a slight difference in meaning. For example「聞く」(きく) means to listen and so does「聴く」(きく). The only difference is that「聴く」means to pay more attention to what you're listening to. For example, listening to music almost always prefers「聴く」over「聞く」.「聞く」can also mean 'to ask', as well as, "to hear" but「訊く」(きく) can only mean "to ask". Yet another example is the common practice of writing「見る」as「観る」when it applies to watching a show such as a movie. Yet another interesting example is「書く」(かく) which means "to write" while 描く (かく) means "to draw". However, when you're depicting an abstract image such as a scene in a book, the reading of the same word「描く」becomes「えがく」. There's also the case where the meaning and Kanji stays the same but can have multiple readings such as「今日」which can be either「きょう」、「こんじつ」, or「こんにち」. In this case, it doesn't really matter which reading you choose except that some are preferred over others in certain situations.

Finally, there is one special character 々that is really not a character. It simply indicates that the previous character is repeated. For example,「時時」、「様様」、「色色」、「一一」can and usually are written as「時々」、「様々」、「色々」、「一々」.

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In addition to these "features" of Kanji, you will see a whole slew of delightful perks and surprises Kanji has for you as you advance in Japanese. You can decide for yourself if that statement is sarcasm or not. However, don't be scared into thinking that Japanese is incredibly hard. Most of the words in the language usually only have one Kanji associated with it and a majority of Kanji do not have more than two types of readings.

2.5.4 Why Kanji?

Some people may think that the system of using separate, discrete symbols instead of a sensible alphabet is overly complicated. In fact, it might not have been a good idea to adopt Chinese into Japanese since both languages are fundamentally different in many ways. But the purpose of this guide is not to debate how the language should work but to explain why **you** must learn Kanji in order to learn Japanese. And by this, I mean more than just saying, "That's how it's done so get over it!".

You may wonder why Japanese didn't switched from Chinese to romaji to do away with having to memorize so many characters. In fact, Korea adopted their own alphabet for Korean to greatly simplify their written language with great success. So why shouldn't it work for Japanese? I think anyone who has learned Japanese for a while can easily see why it won't work. At any one time, when you convert typed Hiragana into Kanji, you are presented with almost always at least two choices (two homophones) and sometimes even up to ten. (Try typing "kikan"). The limited number of set sounds in Japanese makes it hard to avoid homophones. Compare this to the Korean alphabet which has 14 consonants and 10 vowels. Any of the consonants can be matched to any of the vowels giving 140 sounds. In addition, a third and sometimes even fourth consonant can be attached to create a single letter. This gives over 1960 sounds that can be created theoretically. (The number of sounds that are actually used is actually much less but it's still much larger than Japanese.)

Since you want to read at a much faster rate than you talk, you need some visual cues to instantly tell you what each word is. You can use the shape of words in English to blaze through text because most words have different shapes. Try this little exercise: Hi, enve thgouh all teh wrods aer seplled icorrenctly, can you sltil udsternand me?" Korean does this too because it has enough characters to make words with distinct and different shapes. However, because the visual cues are not distinct as Kanji, spaces needed to be added to remove ambiguities. (This presents another problem of when and where to set spaces.)

With Kanji, we don't have to worry about spaces and much of the problem of homophones is mostly resolved. Without Kanji, even if spaces were to be added, the ambiguities and lack of visual cues would make Japanese text much more difficult to read.

Chapter 3

Basic Grammar

3.1 Basic Grammatical Structures

Now that we have learned how to write Japanese, we can begin going over the basic grammatical structure of the language. This section primarily covers all the parts of speech: nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. It will also describe how to integrate the various parts of speech into a coherent sentence by using particles. By the end of this section, you should have an understanding of how basic sentences are constructed.

3.2 Expressing State-of-Being

3.2.1 Declaring something is so and so using 「だ」

Vocabulary

1. 人【ひと】- person

2. 学生【がく・せい】- student

3. 元気【げん・き】- healthy; lively
   ＊ Used as a greeting to indicate whether one is well

One of the trickiest part of Japanese is that there is no verb for the state-of-being like the verb "to be" in English. You can, however, declare what something is by attaching the Hiragana character 「だ」 to a noun or na-adjective **only**. (We will learn about na-adjectives in the section on adjectives later.)

> **Declaring that something is so using 「だ」**
>
> - Attach 「だ」 to the noun or na-adjective
>   Example: 人＋だ＝人だ

Examples

1. 人だ。
   Is person.

2. 学生だ。
   Is student.

3. 元気だ。
   Is well.

Seems easy enough. Here's the real kicker though.

> **Note**
>
> **A state-of-being can be implied without using 「だ」!**

You can say you're doing well or someone is a student without using 「だ」 at all. For example, below is an example of a very typical greeting among friends. Also notice how the subject isn't even specified when it's obvious from the context.

Typical casual greeting

Ａ：元気？
A: (Are you) well?

Ｂ：元気。
B: (I'm) well.

So you may be wondering, "What's the point of using 「だ」?" Well, the main difference is that a declarative statement makes the sentence sound more emphatic and forceful in order to make it more... well declarative. Therefore, it is more common to hear men use 「だ」 at the end of sentences.

The declarative 「だ」 is also needed in various grammatical structures where a state-of-being must be explicitly declared. There are also times when you cannot attach it. It's all quite a pain in the butt really but you don't have to worry about it yet.

3.2.2　Conjugating to the negative state-of-being

Vocabulary

1. 学生【がく・せい】 - student

2. 友達【とも・だち】 - friend

3. 元気【げん・き】 - healthy; lively
　＊ Used as a greeting to indicate whether one is well

In Japanese, negative and past tense are all expressed by conjugation. We can conjugate a noun or adjective to either its negative or past tense to say that something is *not* [X] or that something *was* [X]. This may be a bit hard to grasp at first but none of these state-of-being conjugations make anything declarative like 「だ」 does. We'll learn how to make these tenses declarative by attaching 「だ」 to the end of the sentence in a later lesson.

First, for the negative, attach 「じゃない」 to the noun or na-adjective.

Conjugation rules for the negative state-of-being

- Attach 「じゃない」 to the noun or na-adjective
  Example: 学生＋じゃない＝学生じゃない

Examples

1. 学生じゃない。
   Is not student.

2. 友達じゃない。
   Is not friend.

3. 元気じゃない。
   Is not well.

3.2.3   Conjugating to the past state-of-being

Vocabulary

1. 学生【がく・せい】- student

2. 友達【とも・だち】- friend

3. 元気【げん・き】- healthy; lively
   ∗ Used as a greeting to indicate whether one is well

We will now learn the past tense of the state-of-being. To say something *was* something, attach 「だった」 to the noun or na-adjective.

In order to say the negative past (*was not*), conjugate the negative to the negative past tense by dropping the 「い」 from 「じゃない」 and adding 「かった」.

Conjugation rules for the past state-of-being

1. **Past state-of-being:** Attach 「だった」 to the noun or na-adjective Example: 友達＋だった ＝友達だった

2. **Negative past state-of-being:** Conjugate the noun or na-adjective to the negative first and then replace the 「い」 of 「じゃない」 with 「かった」
   Example: 友達じゃない → 友達じゃなかった ＝友達じゃなかった

Examples

1. 学生だった。
   Was student.

2. 友達じゃなかった。
   Was not friend.

3. 元気じゃなかった。
   Was not well.

3.2.4   Conjugation summary

We've now learned how to express state-of-being in all four tenses. Next we will learn some particles, which will allow us assign roles to words. Here is a summary chart of the conjugations we learned in this section.

Summary of state-of-being		
	Positive	**Negative**
Non-Past	学生 (だ)	Is student 学生じゃない Is not student
Past	学生だった	Was student 学生じゃなかった Was not student

3.3 Introduction to Particles （は、も、が）

3.3.1 Defining grammatical functions with particles

We want to now make good use of what we learned in the last lesson by associating a noun with another noun. This is done with something called particles. Particles are one or more Hiragana characters that attach to the end of a word to define the grammatical function of that word in the sentence. Using the correct particles is very important because the meaning of a sentence can completely change just by changing the particles. For example, the sentence "Eat fish." can become "The fish eats." simply by changing one particle.

3.3.2 The 「は」 topic particle

Vocabulary

1. 学生【がく・せい】- student

2. うん - yes (casual)

3. 明日【あした】- tomorrow

4. ううん - no (casual)

5. 今日【きょう】- today

6. 試験【しけん】- exam

The first particle we will learn is the topic particle. The topic particle identifies what it is that you're talking about, essentially the topic of your sentence. Let's say a person says, "Not student." This is a perfectly valid sentence in Japanese but it doesn't tell us much without knowing what the person is talking about. The topic particle will allow us to express what our sentences are about. The topic particle is the character 「は」. Now, while this character is normally pronounced as /ha/, it is pronounced /wa/ only when it is being used as the topic particle.

Example 1

ボブ：アリスは学生？
Bob: Is Alice (you) student?

アリス：うん、学生。
Alice: Yeah, (I) am.

Here, Bob is indicating that his question is about Alice. Notice that once the topic is established, Alice does not have to repeat the topic to answer the question about herself.

Example 2

ボブ：ジョンは明日？
Bob: John is tomorrow?

アリス：ううん、明日じゃない。
Alice: No, not tomorrow.

Since we have no context, we don't have enough information to make any sense of this conversation. It obviously makes no sense for John to actually **be** tomorrow. Given a context, as long as the sentence has something to do with John and tomorrow, it can mean anything. For instance, they could be talking about when John is taking an exam.

Example 3

アリス：今日は試験だ。
Alice: Today is exam.

ボブ：ジョンは？
Bob: What about John?

アリス：ジョンは明日。
Alice: John is tomorrow. (As for John, the exam is tomorrow.)

The last example shows how generic the topic of a sentence is. A topic can be referring to any action or object from anywhere even including other sentences. For example, in the last sentence from the previous example, even though the sentence is about when the exam is for John, the word "exam" doesn't appear anywhere in the sentence!

We'll see a more specific particle that ties more closely into the sentence at the end of this lesson with the identifier particle.

3.3.3 The 「も」 inclusive topic particle

Vocabulary

1. 学生【がく・せい】 - student

2. うん - yes (casual)

3. でも - but

4. ううん - no (casual)

Another particle that is very similar to the topic particle is the inclusive topic particle. It is essentially the topic particle with the additional meaning of "also". Basically, it can introduce another topic in addition to the current topic. The inclusive topic particle is the 「も」 character and its use is best explained by an example.

Example 1

ボブ：アリスは学生？
Bob: Is Alice (you) student?

アリス：うん、トムも学生。
Alice: Yeah, and Tom is also student.

The inclusion of 「も」 must be consistent with the answer. It would not make sense to say, "I am a student, and Tom is also not a student." Instead, use the 「は」 particle to make a break from the inclusion as seen in the next example.

Example 2

ボブ：アリスは学生？
Bob: Is Alice (you) student?

アリス：うん、でもトムは学生じゃない。
Alice: Yeah, but Tom is not student.

Below is an example of inclusion with the negative.