

LESSON NOTES

All About #2

Learn the Japanese Writing System

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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is the Japanese Writing System

The Japanese writing system uses two syllabic scripts, known separately as *hiragana* (ひらがな) and *katakana* (カタカナ) and collectively as *kana* (かな), as well as thousands of Chinese characters known as *kanji* (漢字). Each script serves a different function. We use *hiragana* for grammatical elements and for words that do not use *kanji* (or for words where the author doesn't know the *kanji*). We most frequently use *katakana* to write borrowed words of foreign origin and onomatopoeic sound effects. Finally, we use *kanji* for words of both Japanese and Chinese origin as well as many Japanese names.

The earliest written form of Japanese was based on *kanji*. In this system, known as *man'yōgana*, these *kanji* were used for their pronunciation rather than their meaning. Because this system was quite complicated, *kana* were invented as a way to simplify it. As a result, each *hiragana* and *katakana* character comes from a simplified version of a *man'yōgana kanji*. If you look at some of these *man'yōgana kanji* and their simplified *kana* equivalents side-by-side, it is easy to see how they came to be.

There are forty-six characters in the *hiragana* and *katakana* scripts, for a total of ninety-two characters in all. These characters represent sounds, specifically syllables. A syllable is generally made up of a consonant plus a vowel, though some are only a vowel. In Japanese, there are five vowels (a, i, u, e, and o) and fourteen basic consonants (k, s, t, n, h, m, y, r, w, g, z, d, b, and p).

We use the *hiragana* syllabary for two types of words that do not use *kanji*: *okurigana* (送り仮名), which are inflected verb and adjective endings; and for grammatical elements called "particles." *Hiragana* is also used to write *furigana* (ふりがな), small symbols placed above or to the side of a *kanji* character that indicate how it is read. While *furigana* is most frequently used to aid children and foreigners learning Japanese, it is also used when the reading for a *kanji* is particularly difficult or uncommon. *Hiragana* are characterized by their curvy, flowing lines.

We use the *katakana* syllabary for *gairaigo* (外来語), words of foreign origin, onomatopoeic words that indicate sounds, scientific names, and also for emphasis, much like how italics are used in English. *Katakana* are characterized by their angular, boxy lines.

Kanji are Chinese characters that have been adapted into Japanese over many years. The characters were originally pictographs of people, animals, and other objects.

Kanji	Reading	"Meaning"
口	<i>kuchi</i>	"mouth"
山	<i>yama</i>	"mountain"

As you can see in the table above, the character 口, pronounced *kuchi*, means "mouth"

and is a box shape that resembles an open mouth. Another example is the character 山, pronounced *yama*, which means "mountain" and indeed looks like the skeleton of a mountain. However, over the centuries, *kanji* have become increasingly stylized and most no longer resemble the things they represent. *Kanji* are made up of smaller parts known as radicals. Many characters have been combined with others to create new ones. When written on the page, each character is given exactly the same amount of space, no matter how complex it is. In written Japanese, there are no spaces between characters.

The number of *kanji* in existence number into the tens of thousands, but the good news is that a large number of these are rarely used variants, accumulated throughout history. The Japanese government has created a list of characters recommended for daily use known as *jōyō kanji* (常用漢字), which currently contains 1,945 characters (as of 2009). As this list occasionally undergoes revisions, this number may increase in the future. Studies have shown that full literacy in the Japanese language requires knowledge of around two thousand characters.

Most *kanji* have at least two different kinds of readings: *kun yomi* (訓読み), which is the Japanese reading, and *on yomi* (音読み), which is the original Chinese reading. To give an example, we can read the *kanji* 水 ("water") as either *mizu* (*kun yomi*) or *sui* (*on yomi*). We usually use the *kun yomi* when the *kanji* stands alone and the *on yomi* when the *kanji* is part of a compound. However, there are exceptions to this rule you simply must remember.

Rōmaji (ローマ字) is Japanese transliterated into the Roman alphabet. With *rōmaji*, one can read Japanese without any prior knowledge of the Japanese writing system. There are several systems of *rōmaji*, with the Hepburn system being the most widely used.