

Writing workbook



Japanese

Kana



たほゴ いこテう えらと
ちすよザみキンポめひ
そへしつめてぼろのネ
にまはけさふかギ
れもやにあせほイ
こりう口らとちるよク

Learn
the kana
step
by step

Writing workbook



Japanese

Kana



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Adapted for English speakers
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Introduction

Japanese written language

Japanese is rather unusual in that it uses different writing systems in parallel. One (called **kanji**) is based on Chinese characters. These are logograms or ideograms, in which each symbol represents a concept or word. There are about 2,000 **kanji** ideograms commonly used in Japanese, and well-read Japanese speakers may know some 6,000. The second system (called **kana**) consists of characters that each represent a phonetic syllable. There are two types of syllabic **kana**: **hiragana** (46 characters) and **katakana** (45 characters). Japanese sentences contain a mixture of **kanji** and **kana**.

Before going any further, we should take a brief look at this somewhat complex situation that can make reading and writing Japanese rather tricky ...

Let's go back in time ...

... first to the 5th century CE

Imagine you are an ordinary Japanese person, living on an island relatively far from mainland Asia. Of course, you can speak your local language fluently, but up to this point you have never needed to write anything down.

... and then to the 6th century

A nascent government begins to develop in your country, and writing becomes a necessity so that the administrators can keep records. On the mainland, due to friction between powerful Imperial China and its Korean neighbours, some Koreans decide to cross the sea to seek safety in Japan. Koreans had already adopted the writing system used by the Chinese for thousands of years. When the Koreans arrive in Japan, they bring their knowledge of this system with them. In turn, the new class of civil servants in Japan adopts Chinese as the administrative language.

... and next to the 7th century

Say you are a Japanese civil servant and you know Chinese well, but your wife, who composes oral poems in Japanese, would like to record them for posterity in writing. So you think to yourself, why not use Chinese writing for your own language, Japanese? A mountain is a mountain, in China as in Japan, so why not use the ideogram 山, which means *mountain* (pronounced [*shan*] in Chinese) to write the corresponding Japanese word (pronounced [*yama*])?

And that's where the complications arise: Chinese has very few grammatical markers, unlike Japanese. So if you want to write a Japanese sentence using Chinese characters, quite a few elements are missing. For example:

He lived in a mountain village.

→ oral Japanese: **yama no mura ni kurashita**
(mountain [relationship] village [place] lived)

There is a Chinese character for **yama** *mountain*, **mura** *village* and **kurashi** *live*, but nothing that corresponds to the grammatical functions indicated by **no**, **ni** and the ending **-ta**.

You rack your brains and have a brilliant idea: just represent these words with ideograms that are pronounced in the same way, regardless of their meaning. Like a rebus puzzle! The idea sounds great, but the result is a strange mish-mash – in the same sentence, some ideograms represent a concept, while others represent a sound. Moreover, you might choose one character to represent **ni**, for example, but since there are several symbols with this pronunciation, someone else might choose another. Basically, it's a mess!

... finally, let's jump to the 9th century

Over time, attempts to make the system clearer developed. First of all, it was decided which ideogram would be used to represent each syllable in a consistent way (or at least limiting the choice to two or three different characters), and then the way it was written was simplified. Since the character serves to represent a phonetic sound rather than a concept, it does not need to be written in exactly the same way. This simplification became the **hiragana** syllabary, allowing texts to be composed in Japanese using a writing system that represents the language phonetically.

Original ideogram	Derived hiragana	Original ideogram	Derived hiragana
久 <i>a long time</i>	く ku	安 <i>peaceful</i>	あ a
曾 <i>formerly</i>	そ so	以 <i>by means of</i>	い i
止 <i>to stop</i>	と to	衣 <i>clothing</i>	え e
奈 <i>What?</i>	な na	左 <i>left</i>	さ sa
奴 <i>slave</i>	ぬ nu	太 <i>thick</i>	た ta
祢 <i>shrine</i>	ね ne	波 <i>waves</i>	は ha
比 <i>to compare</i>	ひ hi	美 <i>beautiful</i>	み mi
保 <i>to protect</i>	ほ ho	武 <i>warrior</i>	む mu
女 <i>woman</i>	め me	与 <i>to give</i>	よ yo
呂 <i>spine</i>	ろ ro	留 <i>to stay</i>	る ru

Above: Some examples of the sources of the **hiragana** syllabary.

At the same time, Japanese monks studying Buddhist teachings written in Chinese came up with an excellent idea to assist their reading. They prepared the texts so they could be read directly in Japanese, without having to translate them first. All Buddhist terms were simply adopted from Chinese, so only the grammatical elements present in Japanese needed to be added to the Chinese words. They had the same clever idea of indicating these elements by ideograms representing their sound, placing these right next to the character in question. The ideogram was then simplified to keep just a recognizable part of it. This became the **katakana** syllabary: it represents the same sounds as **hiragana**, but the characters are different.

Since then, many other developments have taken place, but let's skip directly to the 21st century. In the Japanese written language today, ideograms (**kanji**) and the two syllabaries (**hiragana** and **katakana**) are used together to make sentences. The basic rule is: **kanji** ideograms are used for nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs; **hiragana** is used for grammatical elements or for ideograms that are difficult or rarely used; and **katakana** is used to transcribe foreign words, whether these are proper nouns or loanwords.

Original ideogram	Derived katakana	Original ideogram	Derived katakana
久 <i>a long time</i>	ク ku	阿 <i>to flatter</i>	ア a
曾 <i>formerly</i>	ソ so	伊 <i>that one</i>	イ i
止 <i>to stop</i>	ト to	江 <i>bay</i>	エ e
奈 <i>What?</i>	ナ na	散 <i>to scatter</i>	サ sa
奴 <i>slave</i>	ヌ nu	多 <i>many</i>	タ ta
祢 <i>shrine</i>	ネ ne	八 <i>eight</i>	ハ ha
比 <i>to compare</i>	ヒ hi	三 <i>three</i>	ミ mi
保 <i>to protect</i>	ホ ho	牟 <i>pupil</i>	ム mu
女 <i>woman</i>	メ me	與 <i>to give</i>	ヨ yo
呂 <i>spine</i>	ロ ro	流 <i>to flow</i>	ル ru

Above: Some examples of the sources of the **katakana** syllabary

Hiragana, invented for the purpose of writing Japanese words, is never used for writing words of Chinese origin (except in the first years of school and in manuals for foreigners). These latter are written with **kanji** (Chinese characters). However, a word of Japanese origin, even if it is normally written in **kanji**, can also be written in **hiragana**. This is why all of the words used in the **hiragana** practice pages of this workbook are of Japanese origin (with one or two exceptions).

Katakana, invented for the purpose of reading Chinese, is linked to foreign concepts. Thus the words used in the **katakana** practice pages of this workbook are of non-Japanese or Chinese origin. The great majority are borrowed from English, and a few are from French, German or Portuguese. The **katakana** characters are also increasingly used to write the names of animals and insects, for which the **kanji** are not commonly used and so are difficult to remember.

Writing kana: some rules

Structure of the syllabaries

Each **kana** corresponds to a phonetic syllable. This can be:

- a single vowel
- a combination of a consonant + vowel
- a combination of a semi-vowel + vowel.

In Japanese, there are a relatively small number of letter sounds: 5 vowels and 13 consonants. There are also two sounds that are considered semi-vowels (**y** as in *yes* and **w** as in *we*.) How many different syllables can be made with these sounds? Let's add them up: 5 syllables for single vowels and 65 syllables (13 consonants x 5 vowels = 65) for combinations of a consonant and a vowel should make, in theory, 70 different syllables. Plus the 10 syllables for the combinations of a semi-vowel and a vowel, for a theoretical total of 80 syllables.

But in fact, in each **kana** syllabary (**hiragana** and **katakana**), there are only around half this number. This is because not all possible combinations of consonants, vowels and semi-vowels exist, and also because certain **kana** are used for more than one combination (with a slight modification). More on this later!

Naturally, you are no doubt keen to begin writing, but before you get started, let's go over some basics so you understand what you're writing and how to pronounce it.

1. Vowels

Japanese vowels (in Japanese order): a, i, u, e, o

- The vowels are not too tricky as all the sounds are also found in English: **a** [ah] as in *car*, **i** [ee] as in *need*, **u** [oo] as in *food*, **e** [eh] as in *medal*, **o** [oh] as in *cold*.
- There are also two semi-vowels (**y** and **w**), so-called because they sound phonetically similar to a vowel, but are used more like a consonant. These Japanese semi-vowels are pronounced **y** as in *yes*, and **w** as in *we*.

2. Consonants

Japanese consonants: b, d, g, h, j, k, m, n, p, r, s (and the variant **sh**), **t** (and the variants **ts / ch**), **z**

Most of the letters are pronounced in a similar way as in English, so shouldn't pose too much of a problem. Here are the main points to keep in mind:

- The **g** is always a hard [g], as in *garden*.
- The **s** is always a soft [s], as in *sun*.
- The pronunciation of **r** lies somewhere between [l] and [d]; it sounds similar to the soft 't' in the American English pronunciation of *water*.
- The letter sound **ts** is pronounced like *cats* – the **t** is not silent. There is a distinct difference between **ts** and **s**.
- The pronunciation of the syllable **fu** is actually more like [hoo].

3. Consonant + vowel combinations

Most syllables consist of a consonant (or semi-vowel) followed by a vowel.

- As there are five vowels, for each consonant there is a set of five **kana**. For example, the syllables for **m** are **ma, mi, mu, me, mo**.
- With the semi-vowels, the set is not complete. A **y** forms syllables only with **a, u** or **o**: **ya, yu, yo**. The **w** forms syllables only with **a** or **o**: **wa, wo** (the latter is actually pronounced [oh]).
- When the consonant **s** is followed by the vowel **i**, it becomes **shi**. So the set of syllables for **s** is **sa, shi, su, se, so**.
- When the consonant **t** is followed by **i** or **u**, these syllables become **chi** [chee] and **tsu** [tsoo]. So the set of syllables for **t** is **ta, chi, tsu, te, to**.
- Finally, there is one consonant that can form a syllable on its own, without a vowel: **n**.

Stroke order

If you want to write Japanese well, it's important to respect some simple rules regarding the order of the strokes you use to write each character.

To this end, this workbook presents the **kana** according to the number of strokes they consist of (for the Japanese order of the **kana**, see pages 63 and 118). To give you practice, we start with the most basic characters, made up of only one stroke, and work up to the more complex characters, made up of four strokes.

Kana writing rules

The key is to remember these four basic rules:

1. A **kana** is always written from top to bottom:

う ミ

2. A **kana** is always written from left to right:

い ル

3. When one or more horizontal or vertical strokes cross, always write the horizontal strokes first:

ま キ

4. When a character is made up of strokes on either side of a central element, always write the central element first:

ふ ホ

Writing workbook



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This writing workbook is designed to help you learn to write kana (hiragana and katakana) – the characters that represent phonetic syllables in the Japanese writing system. To allow you to learn as easily as possible, the characters are introduced so they progress in difficulty (from 1 stroke to 4 strokes). The grids for writing practice also guide you step by step, starting with larger squares and gradually decreasing in size. There are additional exercises to extend your learning, plus helpful tips and interesting information about kana.

- **Introduction to writing Japanese characters**
- **All the kana step by step**
- **Additional exercises to extend your learning**

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