

THE WRITING SYSTEMS & HIRAGANA

East Asian languages such as Chinese, Korean and Japanese have similarities since they share part of their history and culture, but the Japanese language is unique in the sense that it uses 3 writing systems: **KANJI**- traditional Chinese characters which represent whole words (*the hardest to learn for foreigners*), **HIRAGANA**- syllable sound representations of Kanji and the Japanese language in general (*the most useful for beginners*), and **KATAKANA**- syllable sound representations of foreign words (*borrowings from other languages and foreign names*).

Those 3 writing systems are commonly used in Japanese and may be combined in one same sentence, which is very hard and confusing for foreigners at the beginning. See below →

私はコーラを飲みます。 [watashi wa ko-ra wo nomimasu.]

(I drink a coke(*ko-ra*))

If from the moment you start learning Japanese, you can skip learning Kanji (it is not advised but an option at the beginner's level anyway), you cannot bypass Hiragana as this “alphabet” is the one you will use the most to read and write in Japanese.

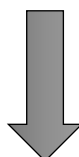
Mastering Kanji requires a lot of time and practice; children start learning them from Primary School and continue all the way to High School. It takes 12 years to acquire them for locals so do not expect as a foreigner to master them in the first year of learning Japanese. No way!

And this is where Hiragana come in handy... they will enable you to read the Kanji. In fact, when you buy Japanese books for children or foreigners, or go to Karaoke, you will always see Kanji written with its Hiragana pronunciation on top. See an example below →

Nihongo = the Japanese language



As for Katakana, you will also need to know them to be able to write your name, among other things, but we will focus on those in the next lesson.



🌟 Sounds in the Japanese language

The Japanese language is composed of 5 vowels: A – I – U – E – O
 which can be coupled with a consonant. あ い う え お

A shall be pronounced as [ah]
 I shall be pronounced as [ee]
 U shall be pronounced as [oo]
 E shall be pronounced as [ay]
 O shall be pronounced as [oh]

H is also pronounced in Japanese.

R sounds like an [l] ex: Karate → [KA- LA- TAY]

🌟 Hiragana (ひらがな)

Now let's focus on the learning of Hiragana. Here is just a table to help you differentiate and memorize them. You will also need to practise their writing; for that, we advise you to print out or buy Hiragana exercise books. You may also find videos that show you the order in which you should write them.

How does it work?

You have the 5 vowels. Each vowel can be read on its own, or be coupled with a consonant. So, all you need to do is add one of the following consonants on the left, and read the syllable. The sound of the vowels never changes and will always be as taught previously.

	A	I	U	E	O
	あ	い	う	え	お
K	か [ka]	き [ki]	く [ku]	け [ke]	こ [ko]
S	さ [sa]	し [shi]	す [su]	せ [se]	そ [so]
T	た [ta]	ち [chi]	つ [tsu]	て [te]	と [to]
N	な [na]	に [ni]	ぬ [nu]	ね [ne]	の [no]
H	は [ha]	ひ [hi]	ふ [hu]	へ [he]	ほ [ho]
M	ま [ma]	み [mi]	む [mu]	め [me]	も [mo]
Y	や [ya]		ゆ [yu]		よ [yo]
R	ら [ra]	り [ri]	る [ru]	れ [re]	ろ [ro]
W	わ [wa]				を [wo/o]
N	ん [n] (**)				

-Colors above are connecting letters that look similar. Be careful when memorizing them.

-Dark grey blanks indicate that the sounds are inexistent.

(**): ん is a letter in itself. It does not need any vowel to exist and is pronounced as a proper English [n]

Exercises 1) Read the following words and translate them into their Romaji (*latin alphabet*) form.

ex: わに → wani (crocodile)

- いぬ → (dog)
- とり → (bird)
- ねこ → (cat)
- むし → (insect)
- くるま → (car)

2) Write the Hiragana of the following syllable-pronounced words.

ex: KUTSU → くつ (shoes)

- UMA → (horse)
- NIHON → (Japan)
- SAKANA → (fish)
- HACHI → (bee)
- HAI → (yes)

 **Hiragana with modified letters**

Letters do not change, so it will be no extra work to remember. You only need to pay attention to 2 small details (*in red*) → the *dakuten* – which is used to make softer sounds は

→ the *handakuten* – which is only used for the sound [p] は



Those 2 little signs should always be written on the **top right corner** of the letter.

	A	I	U	E	O
G	が [ga]	ぎ [gi]	ぐ [gu]	げ [ge]	ご [go]
Z	ざ [za]	じ [ji]	ず [zu]	ぜ [ze]	ぞ [zo]
D	だ [da]	ぢ [ji]	づ [zu]	で [de]	ど [do]
B	ば [ba]	び [bi]	ぶ [bu]	べ [be]	ぼ [bo]
P	ぱ [pa]	ぴ [pi]	ぷ [pu]	ぺ [pe]	ぽ [po]

じ & ぢ and ず & づ have the same pronunciation (*hence the colors in the table*) but the



Hiragana is different so be careful. Most of the time じ & ず will be used, but sometimes the 2 others will appear in certain composed words such as はなぢ [hanaji]= nose bleed, or かんづめ [kanzume]= a can.

Exercise: Read the following words and translate them into their Romaji form.

- さんぽ → (a walk)
- えんぴつ → (a pencil)
- はじめまして → (nice to meet you)

✚ Hiragana with composed letters

Those Hiragana will be used to make specific sounds with “ya”, “yu” and “yo”, hence their name *composed*. Here again, the same letters that you have already learnt are used, so all you need to remember is how to combine them with those 3 specific sounds.

ex: car park → ちゆうしゃじょう [Chūshajō] → ち + ゆ = chu ; し + や = sha ; じ + よ = jo
(chi + yu) (shi + ya) (ji + yo)

	A	U	O
ky	きや [kya]	きゆ [kyu]	きよ [kyo]
sh	しゃ [sha]	しゆ [shu]	しよ [sho]
ch	ちや [cha]	ちゆ [chu]	ちよ [cho]
ny	にや [nya]	にゆ [nyu]	によ [nyo]
hy	ひや [hya]	ひゆ [hyu]	ひよ [hyo]
my	みや [mya]	みゆ [myu]	みよ [myo]
ry	りや [rya]	りゆ [ryu]	りよ [ryo]
gy	ぎや [gya]	ぎゆ [gyu]	ぎよ [gyo]
j	じゃ [ja]	じゆ [ju]	じよ [jo]
by	びや [bya]	びゆ [byu]	びよ [byo]
py	ぴや [pya]	ぴゆ [pyu]	ぴよ [pyo]



や, ゆ and よ are always smaller than the letter on the left when combined.

Exercise: Write the Hiragana of the following syllable-pronounced words.

- KYOU → (today)
- JUUSHO → (an address)
- RYOKOU → (a trip)