

Basic Japanese by David-Lee Stevenson

Lesson 1

Let me first start, by giving a brief explanation as to how I am going to go about the lessons. Each lesson I will introduce one character from each of the three different character sets used by the Japanese. The first is called Hirigana. The second is called Katakana. The third is called Kanji.

Eventually, we will run out of Hirigana and Katakana to introduce, so I will then switch to three Kanji in each lesson. The Japanese also use Romaji, which is basically English letters used to spell Japanese words.

I will use some Romaji as I go along as well, but as the Hirigana, Katakana and Kanji get introduced, I will continually use them more and more. Eventually, the Romaji will only be used to explain the pronunciation of new characters being introduced.

To understand Japanese, we must first understand the three character sets and what they are used for.

The first character set is Hirigana. It is not an alphabet, but is a Syllably. A Syllably represents syllables, and not letter, as in English. So some of the characters will represent “ka” or “Bo” or “Ge” etc, where as English and Romaji need two letters to accomplish the saem thing.

The first letter we will learn from Hirigana is the syllable 'a'.

The image shows the Hirigana character 'あ' (a), which is a stylized, rounded character with a horizontal bar at the top and a circular base.

It's a very short 'ah' sound. Like in 'father', but shorter. Think of it like you are about to interupt someone and stop yourself short, so you go “Ah!” really quick. Whenever there is a word or syllable with あ in it, the pronunciation will not change. The good thing about Japanese, is this is

true for all hirigana and katakana. Once you learn the character the pronunciation never changes. (Kanji is a little different. As we will discover later). Hirigana means “Womans Hand”, and was invented by women who didn't like using the long Kanji system used by men at that stage.

Katakana is also a syllably. Katakana has more square (or boxy) looking characters. Katakana is mainly used to represent foreign (loan) words or foreign names. As we learn the Hirigana, we will learn the Katakana equivalent. So the first katakana also represents the syllable 'a'.

It is pronounced exactly the same as the Hirigana.



Next we come to the Kanji. This is the tricky bit in the Japanese writing system. Kanji is based on the Chinese writing system, and is not a syllably, so the pronunciation of the character can change with context.

Our first Kanji is :



The first pronoucniation I will teach is 'ni'. Pronounced like 'Knee'. If you've seen Monty Python and the Holy Grail, think of the scene with the Knights who say “Ni”. The 'i' sound is the same as the end of the word Hawaii.

Kanji represent ideas, so I will explain that this symbol represents the sun with a sun spot in the middle. Eventually, the round sun became more square, and the sun spot changed from a dot to a stroke across the middle.

The “ni” pronunciation is used in words such as Nihon, which means Japan. In the next lesson, I will introduce the Kanji for “Hon” so that you will be able to write the word for Japan. In this context, the “Ni” means Sun. You've heard fo Japan being refered to as the “Land of the Rising Sun”. Well, this is where that term comes from.

The second pronunciation is “nichi”. The 'Chi' sound is pronounced like “Chee”. The same as in the word “cheese”, but shorter. Nichi means Sun,

or Day, as do the next two pronunciations, “Jitsu” and “hi”. Jitsu is pronounced “JeeTsoo”, it might be hard for you to get the Tsu bit correct at first. The “Hi” bit is pronounced “Hee” as though you are laughing. Hee hee! Never “Hi” as though you are greeting someone you know.

As your vocabulary increases in Japanese, you'll begin to recognise where each of these different pronunciations occurs.

There is one last pronunciation and that is “ka”. It's pronounced like the “ah” we have already learned, but with a “k” on the front. So “ka”, as though you are going to say Car, but with no “R” on the end. This also means “Day”, but only in the context of it being a “day of the month” or in reference to the/a “number of days”.

Okay, let's throw a few of these into some context. The Capitals will indicate the Kanji being used in Romaji. Don't worry too much about the pronunciation of the bits we haven't learnt yet. We'll pick them up later.

Japanese Kanji	Meaning	Romaji
日本 hon	Japan	NI-hon.
日 node	Sunrise	HI-node
Hon 日	Today	hon-JITSU
yok 四	four days/fourth day	yok-KA

Table 1.

This Kanji will become useful once we start to refer to things Japanese, dates, or whether we did something today, or some other day.

Exercises:

1. Practice stroke order for all three of today's lessons. It is important to get stroke order correct when learning to write the letters by hand. Below are some tables which you can use to practice, as well as stroke order for each letter. Each stroke starts at the number 1 and follows the arrow. Where there are two or more arrows (indicating continuation of the flow of the stroke), the arrows go in numerical order.

2. Print off these letters and make some cards from them. (Either print them onto cardboard and cut them out, or print on paper & glue them on cardboard). Use them to play one of the 'memory' games listed.

GAME 1 – CONCENTRATION

In concentration, you turn all of the cards over face down. Each player takes turns to turn over two cards. As they turn each card over, they say

the character revealed aloud. If they get two characters which match, then they keep the cards and score a point. This continues till all cards have been matched. (Not an exciting game with only three characters, but as our character base builds it will get more difficult, and more fun).

GAME 2 – Go Fish

Use the cards you print off to play Go Fish. In case you don't know the rules Grab a partner or two, deal seven cards (if possible, probably only two in the first game). Ask the other person if they have a match for a card in your hand. (like, say, “Do you have a Nichi?”) If they say yes, you get the card and make a match. If they don't have the card, they say, “No, go fish”. At which point you pick up the first card off the top of the deck. Whoever makes the most matches wins the game.

GAME 3 – Memory Game

Simply place the cards face down. As you turn them over, pronounce the name out loud. If you get it right, you score the card. If you get it wrong, place it on the bottom of the pile. If more than one person is playing, then take it in turns. Game ends when you run out of cards. Most cards wins.

That concludes the first lesson.