

Japanese Language Club Lesson 1

There are five short vowel sounds in Japanese (a, i, u, e, o). From each of these stems the rest of the syllables – each syllable is a consonant followed by one of these vowels. The only exception is n, which is considered a syllable by itself. The same two vowels next to each other are considered long vowels (we'll cover this later).

Pronunciation

a	“ah” as in <u>fa</u> ther
i	“ee” as in <u>blee</u> d
u	“oo” as in <u>foo</u> d
e	“ay” as in <u>pa</u> y
o	“oh” as in <u>jo</u> ke

Gojuuonzu is Japanese for "table of fifty sounds" (literally "five tens sound illustration", but you get the idea). It is a way of organizing the phonetic alphabets. Here is the Gojuuonzu in roomaji (Roman alphabet):

Chart 1

N	Wa	Ra	Ya	Ma	Ha	Na	Ta	Sa	Ka	a	<-- a line
	I	Ri	I	Mi	Hi	Ni	Chi	Shi	Ki	i	<-- i line
	U	Ru	Yu	Mu	Fu	Nu	Tsu	Su	Ku	u	<-- u line
	E	Re	E	Me	He	Ne	Te	Se	Ke	e	<-- e line
	O	Ro	Yo	Mo	Ho	No	To	So	Do	o	<-- o line

Chart 2

Pa	Ba	Da	Za	Ga	
Pi	Bi	Ji	Ji	Gi	
Pu	Bu	Zu	Zu	Gu	<-- u line
Pe	Be	De	Ze	Ge	
Po	Bo	Do	Zo	Go	

Chart 3

Pya	Bya	Ja	Gya	Rya	Mya	Hya	Nya	Cha	Sha	Kya
Pyu	Byu	Ju	Gyu	Ryu	Myu	Hyu	Nyu	Chu	Shu	Kyu
Pyo	Byo	Jo	Gyo	Ryo	Myo	Hyo	Nyo	Cho	Sho	Kyo

General Rules to Follow

There are no silent vowel sounds in Japanese.

Example: Sake

Emphasis on syllables tends to be uniform – each syllable is stressed just the same.

Example: O-ki-na-wa – the stress is the same on all four syllables.

Some Japanese words are formed from just one syllable such as ka (mosquito), e (picture), ha (tooth), me (eye), and more. Most words, however, are made up of two or more syllables. In fact, there are many more multisyllabic words in Japanese than in English. Remember that n is counted as a syllable.

Wani (Alligator)	wa-ni (2 syllables)
Omocha (Toy)	o-mo-cha (3 syllables)
Hataraku (To work)	ha-ta-ra-ku (4 syllables)
Atarashii (New)	a-ta-ra-shi-i (5 syllables)
Suizokukan (Aquarium)	su-i-zo-ku-ka-n (6 syllables)

Sounds to Note

L and R Sounds

In Japanese, the Ra, Ri, Ru, Re and Ro sounds are halfway between an English “L” and “R”, hence the well-known difficulty that Japanese people have in distinguishing them. Since, however, there is only the one sound in Japanese, foreigners are not faced with any great problem – “la” and “ra” will both be understood as a Japanese Ra.

Examples: Sara (Dish), Ringo (Apple), Saru (Monkey), Terebi (Television), Soroban (Abacus)

Tsu Sound

This is a sound not encountered in English. The Tsu sound is pronounced like the “-ts” at the end of the word “sports”, then lengthened with an English “oo”.

Examples: Tsuki (Moon), Tsubo (Pot), Kutsu (Shoes), Tsume (Fingernail), Tsukue (Desk)

Fu Sound

The English “f” is pronounced by touching the lower lip with the upper teeth. When pronouncing Japanese Fu, attempt to pronounce an English “f”, but do not make contact between lip and teeth. The sound produced will be a rather breathy “wh”.

Examples: Fude (Brush), Fune (Ship), Naifu (Knife), Fukuro (Bag), Fuji-san (Mount Fuji)

N Sound

This is a nasal sound. It never occurs at the beginning of a word, but is found in the middle or at the end of words. Pronounce it with air coming through the nose.

Examples: Hon (Book), Enpitsu (Pencil), Shinbun (Newspaper), Pan (Bread), Chawan (Rice Bowl), Yakan (Kettle)

Double Consonants

Double consonants such as “kk”, “pp”, “ss”, or “tt” are pronounced with a slight pause between the first and second consonant sound, the same way as “hot tea” or “red door” are pronounced in English.

Pronounce the first consonant along with the preceding vowel, then hesitate for a split second before pronouncing the second consonant so that two distinct syllables are formed. The double consonant form of “ch” is tch”, not “ch” as one might think.

Examples: Sek-ken (Soap), Hap-pa (Leaf), Zas-shi (Magazine), Kit-te (Stamp), Mat-chi (Matches)

Long Vowel Sounds

As well as the five short vowel sounds, Japanese contains five long vowel sounds, each vowel lengthening to a two-syllable sound. There are different ways of showing the letters; sometimes you will see a double vowel written as ii, and sometimes you will see it written with a line over the top like ī.

Examples: Obaasan (Grandmother), Iie (No), Fuusen (Balloon), Oneesan (Elder sister), Sooko (Warehouse)

It is important to take care when pronouncing long vowels since a long or short vowel frequently changes a word’s meaning completely. For instance, if obaasan is pronounced with a short (single) vowel instead of a long (double) vowel, the meaning changes from “grandmother” to “aunt”. More drastically, if a wife talks of her shujin, she means her “husband”, but if the word is pronounced shuujin, she will end up talking about her “prisoner”. So before pronouncing a word, always take note whether it has a short or long vowel. Exercise: Try saying the Gojuuonzu with long vowel sounds.

Voiceless Vowel Sounds

Japanese vowels are primarily voiced, but in the following cases they are voiceless.

1. When the vowel i or u is used between two voiceless consonants – e.g., k,p, s (sh), h (f), or t (ts) – it is generally voiceless.
Example: Hito (Person), Kusuri (Medicine)
2. The final letter “u” in desu and –masu is usually voiceless.
Example: Kore wa pen desu. “This is a pen.”