

Japanese Written Language

There are four basic character sets used in writing modern Japanese: katakana, hiragana, kanji, and roomaji.

Katakana and hiragana are both grouped into syllabaries (an alphabet is made of letters; a syllabary is made up of syllables) and are grouped in the category of kana. The syllables are arranged into the Gojuuonzu, a specific order of syllables. The first 5 characters are the five vowels, a,i,u,e,o. All Japanese syllables, excepting *n*, which is a vowel by itself, derive from these sounds made by placing a consonant in front of the the vowel, or using contractions, such as *kya*, *kyu*, *kyo*, etc.

Kanji is the most complicated script in Japanese. Kanji are actually Chinese ideograms and number in the thousands, each one representing a different **idea**, not necessarily a different sound as is the case with katakana, hiragana, and roomaji. In fact, most of the characters have more than one possible reading. The ideogram for “person” can be read as *jin*, *nin*, *hito*, *bito*, *ri*, and several other sounds.

When the Japanese language is written using Roman letters (for example, the letters used to write this sentence), it's called *roomaji*. The word is a combination of the English "Roman" and the Japanese *ji*, which means "character".

Katakana

Katakana is a very angular script and is composed of 46 basic yet very distinctive characters. Katakana can be used to express any sound in the Japanese language. Katakana is most commonly used to express:

- Foreign names.
- Borrowed foreign words, like “computer” or “beer”.
- Company names, like Toyota or Yamaha.
- New words in Japanese, like *pachinko* or *karaoke*.

Hiragana

Hiragana is a much smoother script, full of loops and curves. There are 46 basic hiragana characters, each one having a counterpart in katakana. As such, all sounds in the Japanese language can be expressed with just hiragana. These two basic writing systems share most rules, but lengthening vowel sounds and making consonant sounds harder are done differently in the two sets.

Hiragana characters are most commonly used to express:

- Simple words, like the verb *aru* or the noun *neko*.
- Conjugations at the ends of verbs, like *mimasu* (I see) and *mimashita* (I saw.)
- Particles of speech, such as *wa*, *e*, and *o*.
- Hiragana is the first writing system taught to Japanese children, so low-level children's books are written exclusively in hiragana, and even in more advanced level texts, difficult kanji will have the pronunciation written above in hiragana.

Kanji

Kanji are the most difficult of the characters to master and are most commonly used to express:

- Place names, like Tokyo or Osaka.
- The names of people with Japanese names.
- Most nouns, as well as verb and adjective stems.
- You should notice, though, that over the years the Japanese system has diverged from the Chinese, often simplifying characters.

Roomaji

Beginners who speak a Western language usually start out by using roomaji because they can start reading and writing Japanese immediately without having to learn hiragana or katakana. But roomaji is just an approximation of true Japanese, and students often get confused by why some people (especially native Japanese speakers) write Japanese in roomaji in what seems to be a strange way.

One of the reasons why romanized Japanese can be confusing is that there are two standardized systems for

converting the Japanese sounds into roman letters. One is called the "Hepburn" system, and it's designed to make it easy for Westerners to read and pronounce. The other is called "Monbusho", and it's the system that the Japanese Ministry of Education teaches to Japanese students. "Monbusho" is almost a straight transliteration of the original Japanese symbols into Roman letters, but it produces text which is more difficult for a Westerner to read intuitively.

Another reason for confusion is that Japanese is entered into computers using a roman-letter keyboard and software which interprets the keystrokes and turns them into the appropriate kana characters. Most of this type of software has some shortcuts that people often get used to using (such as interpreting "du" to create a voiced "tsu" kana character). These people then often use the same shortcuts when they're typing in romaji.

For all systems, the basic Japanese sounds are written exactly as in the "fifty sounds table", but things start to get more interesting for the advanced sounds.

- Both systems indicate a sound gap by doubling the following consonant. So the word "kae<gap>te" is written as "kaette". When written using Japanese kana, the gap is indicated with a miniature "tsu" character. This same character can be used at the end of a sentence or word to show that it has been cut off abruptly, but there's no way to romanize this type of expression.
- Lengthened vowels are written in the Hepburn system by writing two vowels (a lengthened "i" becomes "ii"). This is the same way that vowels are lengthened when they're written in kana, except for a lengthened "i" or "o" sound. In written kana, a long "i" is written using the symbol for "i" followed by the symbol for "e", and a long "o" is usually written by the "o" symbol followed by the "u" symbol (although some long "o" sounds are written with two "o" symbols). The "Monbusho" system carries the kana-based lengthening scheme into Roman letters. Because of this approach, you may see the Japanese word for "true" written as "hontoo" or "hontou".
- The contracted "ya/yu/yo" sound is written in kana using a miniature "ya/yu/yo" symbol. The "Monbusho" system preserves the flavor of this using, for example by spelling the word for "photograph" as "syashin" while the Hepburn system uses "shashin".

The content for this page was taken mainly from two web sites. The explanations for the different characters used in writing Japanese were taken from:
<http://members.aol.com/writejapan/>

The explanation of Romaji was taken from:
<http://japanese.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.seanspot.com%2Fjwrite%2Fjwrite-romaji.htm>