

Intro to Japanese Phonetics



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Intro to Japanese Phonetics

Introduction

In this lesson, we will cover the syllabic Japanese writing systems, the sounds and combined sounds that they make, which characters are particles and what particles are, and how to pronounce characters with sounds that are uncommon in English. By the end of this lesson, you should know all the fundamental skills needed for reading beginning-level Japanese.

When first studying Japanese, learners may be intimidated by the fact that there are three different writing systems: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. While most words can be represented with kanji (Chinese characters), hiragana are commonly used to provide pronunciation, forming the basis of Japanese phonetics. They also feature in many grammatical constructions, especially with verbs, making them a good starting place for any learner.

Unlike the English/Roman alphabet, hiragana is syllabic, meaning most characters are consonant-vowel pairs, as opposed to standing alone. The only exceptions are the five main vowel sounds, which I will describe in detail later, and the consonant "n/m". "For example, in the hiragana symbol か, the English sounds for "k (kuh)" and "a" are combined into one symbol, pronounced "kah."

k+a=か

Like hiragana, katakana is syllabic, and all its sounds are identical to those in hiragana. The only difference is that katakana is used mainly for foreign/loan words, and has a more angular look in comparison. The different writing styles make it easy to pick out loan words at a glance. Katakana attempts to replicate the sounds the word makes in a loan word's native tongue. However, Japanese does not use as many sounds as other languages. As a result, when writing a loan word from a language that uses sounds that Japanese doesn't have, these writing systems make approximations. For example, hambaagaa versus hamburger. Since the "ur" and "er" sounds in hamburger don't exist in Japanese, they are made into a long "a" sound, which sounds similar enough.

Speaking of vowels, there are five main vowel sounds in Japanese, and they dictate the organization of the hiragana and katakana alphabets as well. Instead of a, e, i, o, u, like in English, Japanese has:

- "a" like the a in "talk"
- "i" like the double e in "feed"
- "u" like the double o in "cool"
- "e" like the e in "pet", and
- "o" like the o in "cold".

In right-to-left order, the alphabet begins with these main vowel sounds, then moves on to the consonant-vowel pairs. A, i, u, e, o, ka, ki, ku, ke, ko, and so on. My personal mnemonic aid to remember the order is "A Kind Stranger Told Nobody How Many Years Run Wild".

Romanization is when the characters are written out in the Latin alphabet. This helps learners visualize the pronunciation of each character. While most characters follow the consonant-vowel pairing pretty well, there are a handful of exceptions. Under the “s” column, what would be “si” makes a “shee” sound, and is usually romanized as “shi”. Under the “t” column, “ti” is actually “chee”, romanized as “chi”, and “tu” is actually “tsu”. Under the “h” column, “hu” is “fu”. There is no “yi” or “ye” in modern Japanese, so those slots remain empty, and there is no “wi”, “wu”, or “we”, so “wa”, “wo” and “n” share the last column.

These are the hiragana characters:

わ wa	ら ra	や ya	ま ma	は ha	な na	た ta	さ sa	か ka	あ a
	り ri		み mi	ひ hi	に ni	ち chi	し shi	き ki	い i
を wo	る ru	ゆ yu	む mu	ふ fu	ぬ nu	つ tsu	す su	く ku	う u
	れ re		め me	へ he	ね ne	て te	せ se	け ke	え e
ん n	ろ ro	よ yo	も mo	ほ ho	の no	と to	そ so	こ ko	お o

Take some time to practice reading these characters using the vowel sounds we discussed on the previous page. Also take some time to memorize their appearances.

These are the katakana characters:

ワ wa	ラ ra	ヤ ya	マ ma	ハ ha	ナ na	タ ta	サ sa	カ ka	ア a
	リ ri		ミ mi	ヒ hi	ニ ni	チ chi	シ shi	キ ki	イ i
ヲ wo	ル ru	ュ yu	ム mu	フ fu	ヌ nu	ツ tsu	ス su	ク ku	ウ u
	レ re		メ me	ヘ he	ネ ne	テ te	セ se	ケ ke	エ e
ン n	〇 ro	ョ yo	モ mo	ホ ho	ノ no	ト to	ソ so	コ ko	オ o

Altered Sounds

Outside of these characters, there are a few alterations that can be made to give us an even more extensive range of sounds to use. We have the maru/circle and tenten/dashes, combined sounds, long vowels, and long consonant sounds. These changes affect the hiragana and katakana alphabets equally.

No, your eyes aren't playing tricks on you. Hiragana he/へ and katakana he/^\ look almost exactly the same!

Maru and Tenten

The maru is a small circle that appears on the upper right of the character and softens the consonant sound. Below are the possible sounds when a maru is added:

ぱ/パ
ha→ pa

ぴ/ピ
hi→ pi

ぷ/ブ
fu→ pu

ペ/ペ
he→ pe

ぽ/ボ
ho→ po

Similarly, the tenten is a pair of dashes that appears on the upper right of the character. It can either harden the consonant, like changing s-sounds to z-sounds, or soften the consonant, like changing k-sounds to g-sounds. Below are the possible sounds when a tenten is added:

が/ガ	ぎ/ギ	ぐ/グ	げ/ゲ	ご/ゴ
ka→ ga	ki→ gi	ku→ gu	ke→ ge	ko→ go
ざ/ザ	じ/ジ	ず/ズ	ぜ/ゼ	ぞ/ゾ
sa→ za	shi→ ji	su→ zu	se→ ze	so→ zo
だ/ダ	ぢ/ヂ	づ/ヅ	で/ヂ	ど/ド
ta→ da	chi→ zi	tsu→ zu	te→ de	to→ do
ば/バ	び/ビ	ぶ/ブ	べ/ベ	ぼ/ボ
ha→ ba	hi→ bi	fu→ bu	he→ be	ho→ bo

Combined Sounds

Combined sounds are formed by combining a character ending in “i”, except “i” itself, along with small “ya”, “yu”, or “yo”. For example, き や would be read as “kiya”, but き ゃ would be read as “kyä”. One way to look at it is that you are omitting the “i” sound.

Some of these combinations will have a less pronounced y sound, especially in the softer sounds. “Shiya” becomes “sha”, “Jiya” becomes “ja”, “Chiya” becomes “cha”, and so on. While some romanizations may include the y in their spelling of these combinations (e.g. jya, shya), most will leave it out. When actually

spoken, the y sound isn't as pronounced as other combined sounds like nya or kya.

Small Vowels

Small vowels also pair up with regular sized characters to help create uncommon or foreign sounds. On a computer or phone, these can be typed either by typing the characters in context, or adding an I before the vowel in question. You can think of it as I for “little vowels.” Here are some sounds with small vowels:

ティ	ディ	チエ	ファ	フォ
ti	di	che	fa	fo
(typed thi)	(typed dhi)			

While less common, the English v sound can be made by taking “u”, adding a tenten, and combining it with a small vowel.

ヴァ	ヴィ	ヴ	ヴエ	ヴォ
va	vi	vu	ve	vo

Long Vowels

Next, we have longer vowel sounds. There are two ways to extend a vowel sound. The first way is to add another vowel that extends the sound. Thus you can get “aa”, “ii”, and so on. You can do the same with “e” and “o”, but usually these sounds are extended by adding “i” to get “ei” and “u” to get “ou”, respectively.

おおきい	せんせい	まおう
ookii	sensei	maou
big	teacher	demon lord

These extended vowel sounds are either romanized with the second vowel like I demonstrated above, or with the vowel having a macron/line over it. For example, ū and ō.

The second way to extend a vowel sound is to add this dash-like character: —. It makes no noise on its own, but can be used to extend vowels for foreign/katakana words, like hambaagaa, which would look like this: ハンバーガー.

Double Consonants

Double consonant sounds are sounds where the consonant sound is extended by adding a small tsu / っ / ツ before the character in question. When spoken, this sounds like a brief pause between syllables. This can be applied to any characters beginning with, k, s, t, or p, including those with maru and tenten. When romanized, you will always see the consonant doubled. For example, “kata” versus “katta”.

かた	vs.	かった
kata		katta
shoulder		to have won

For characters beginning with n, instead of using small tsu, you will add the “n” character in the same place. For example, あんない.

Note that in standard Japanese, this does not occur at the beginning of a word.

Particles

Some of these characters function as particles, which describe something about the subject of the sentence or what the subject is

doing. As such, you will see these characters stay in their hiragana forms to serve these grammatical purposes, even as other characters move on to become kanji. Common particles include ha/は, ga/が, wo/を, ni/に, and he/へ.

The three particles that may cause some confusion are ha, wo, and he. In particle form, ha is pronounced and romanized as wa, wo is pronounced and romanized as o, and he is pronounced and romanized as e.

Not only is ha pronounced as wa in particle form, because of ha's phonetic history, there are some words, like konnichiwa and konbanwa, where ha appears and is pronounced as wa.

Why Use Hiragana?

You might be wondering by now, if hiragana and katakana are so easy to read, why isn't everything written in these writing systems? This is because these characters are much like letters in the English alphabet, whereas kanji are more like words. It would be like spelling out every word, all the time, and that would get exhausting to read pretty quickly. For example, spelling out H-O-U-S-E instead of just saying "house". Here's one common Japanese example that gets this point across below:

ははははなが好き。

母は花が好き。

My mother likes flowers.

These are the same sentence, but in the first example, it might be difficult to discern that the third は functions as a particle like we

discussed earlier, and therefore should be pronounced *wa*. Because 母, は, and 花 all use は, without kanji, they run together, making the string of はs difficult to parse/group into separate/their own words. Readers would need to think a bit before realizing the first two は mean mother, and that the last は belongs to はな, for flowers.

In addition, pronunciations are not exclusive to any one word. あめ can mean rain or candy, ちゅうしや can mean parking lot or injection, and はな can mean flowers or one's nose. While you can rely on intonation or context when speaking, using kanji in written text makes it immediately clear which word you are talking about. It also clearly separates words from particles.

Again, because kanji takes a long time to learn and characters can have a range of different readings, hiragana is used to aid the learning process. Japanese elementary school students will write in hiragana as they begin their studies, but as they advance, they will learn more kanji and incorporate those characters into their writing. And you too will use hiragana less and less as you learn more kanji. But hiragana is an important foundation to the language, which is why it's necessary to study.

One section of the JLPT tests your kanji knowledge by breaking sentences down into hiragana like I did in the example earlier. You then need to figure out which kanji fits into the sentence. Weirdly enough, as your Japanese skills improve, you may find exercises like this to become more difficult than they were before!

On that note, furigana is hiragana that appears above kanji to demonstrate the correct reading of the word in context to the reader. Japanese children and beginners of the language will use furigana a lot until they can learn to read kanji without them.

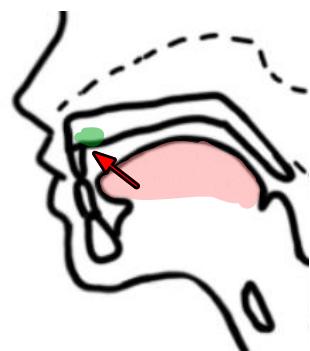
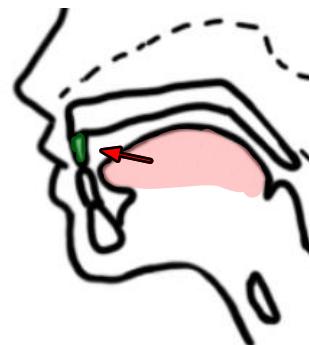
Pronunciation for More Difficult Characters

While some characters, like “ta” and “da” are relatively straightforward in pronunciation, there are a handful of characters that use sounds that rarely, if ever, show up in English. To pronounce these characters, we need to use the points of articulation that native speakers use. Points of articulation are different areas of the mouth and throat that make different sounds based on how the speaker interacts with them. We can interact with them by vocalizing, blowing, tapping or pressing their tongue, and so on.

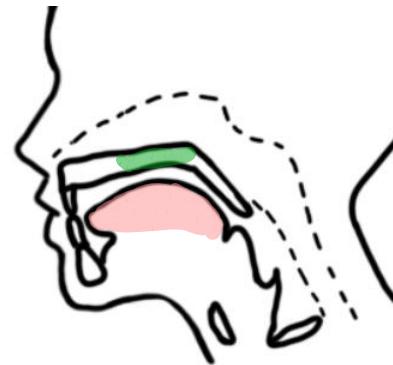
We will address the more difficult sounds, working our way from the front of the mouth to the back of the throat.

“Tsu/ツ”, like the romaji implies, is a mix of the t and s consonant sounds. It can be made by touching your tongue against the back of your upper teeth while exhaling. If that’s a bit difficult for you to imagine, think of pronouncing just the ending part of the English word “hits”.

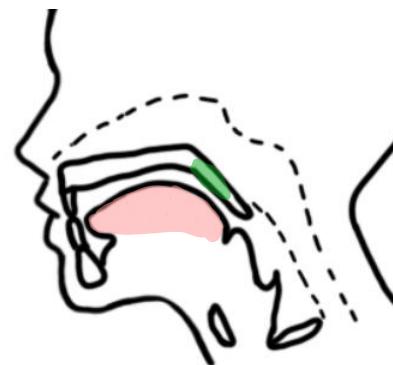
Japanese Rs are not pronounced as strongly. The Japanese r sound is made by tapping the tip of the tongue against the back of the upper gums. You can achieve this effect by taking a t or d sound and softening it. For example, taking the English word “lotto” a bit breathier.



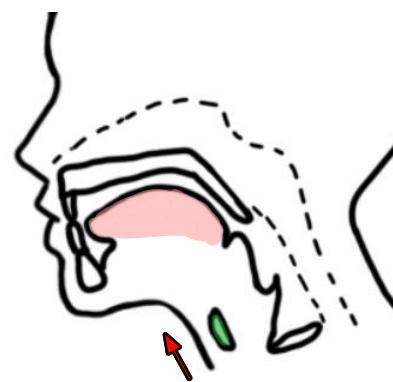
N/ん can function as either an n or m, which is why you may see some romanizations that use one or the other, like senpai versus sempai. ん is somewhere between the two, and can be made by closing the space between your tongue and your hard palate, the hard part of the roof of your mouth.



Fu/ふ is not pronounced as strongly as the f sound in English words like feather or far. Instead, it is more gentle. It's like blowing air onto the roof of your mouth while keeping your lips in an o-shape, or gently blowing out a candle.



Wo/を is pronounced more like the "o" in words like hold. Rather than moving your lips to pronounce the w sound, there's a slight raising of your voice box as you pronounce this character. You can see this happen when the cartilage/adam's apple on your neck raises.



Conclusion

We have just reviewed the hiragana and katakana alphabets, their altered sounds, which characters are particles, and well as how to pronounce characters with sounds that may be unfamiliar. With all of this in mind, you are now ready to begin reading these alphabets.

Remember to practice reading aloud to improve your pronunciation. This is the first step into learning this challenging, but rewarding language. I wish you luck with your studies. And as the Japanese would say, がんばってください (ganbatte kudasai)! Do your best!



Appendix

Resources

- [About WI and WE](#)
- [Hiragana](#)
- [HA vs. WA](#)
- [International Phonetic Alphabet Chart](#)
- [Japanese Particles](#)
- [Long Vowels and Double Consonants](#)
- [Small Kana/Characters](#)
- [Why There is No YI or YE](#)

List of Combined Sounds

きや・キヤ kya	きゅ・キュ kyu	きょ・キョ kyo
ぎや・ギヤ gya	ぎゅ・ギュ gyu	ぎょ・ギョ gyo
しゃ・シャ sha	しゅ・シュ shu	しょ・ショ sho
じゃ・ジャ ja	じゅ・ジュ ju	じょ・ジョ jo
ちゃ・チャ cha	ちゅ・チュ chu	ちょ・チョ cho
にや・ニヤ nya	にゅ・ニュ nyu	にょ・ニョ nyo
ひや・ヒヤ hya	ひゅ・ヒュ hyu	ひょ・ヒョ hyo
びや・ビヤ bya	びゅ・ビュ byu	びょ・ビョ byo
ぴや・ピヤ pya	ぴゅ・ピュ pyu	ぴょ・ピョ pyo
みや・ミヤ mya	みゅ・ミュ myu	みょ・ミョ myo
りや・リヤ rya	りゅ・リュ ryu	りょ・リョ ryo