MASTER JAPANESE

THE BEGINNER’S STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO LEARNING NIHONGO THE FUN WAY

by John Fotheringham
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Help Support Independent Authors

I have spent years researching, writing, and updating my language guides, so if you “borrowed” this book from a friend or downloaded it illegally, please do the right thing and purchase your own copy. This helps feed my face and enables me to continue feeding you the tips and tools you need to learn foreign languages the fun, affordable, adult-friendly way, no matter where in the world you happen to live.

Yours Ninjetically,

John Fotheringham, Author & Chief Executive Ninja

⇒ Buy a copy of Maser Japanese.
Dedication

To My Wife, Rosemary
Thank you for bringing so much joy, laughter, and light into my life. You continually inspire me to be a better man.

To My Parents, Vern & Beverly Fotheringham
Few parents would support their son changing majors from Industrial Design (a degree that might actually lead to a job) to Linguistics (a degree that usually just leads to more school), let alone in the 3rd year of college! You stood by me then and have continued to support me in my language learning adventures across the globe ever since. Thank you for all you do.

To My Siblings, Brooke, Graham & David Fotheringham
My sister and two brothers are each far smarter than I, but were failed by an ineffective language education system. Despiteless brains, I lucked out with a series of inspirational teachers and rewarding life experiences that showed me just how fun languages could be if one is equipped with the right tools, methods, and attitudes.

To ITOU Sensei
ITOU Katsuhiro (伊東克洋) was my first—and by far my favorite—Japanese teacher. Unlike the department head who made a habit of making students feel stupid if they made mistakes in the language, Itou-Sensei created a supportive learning environment that encouraged students to try things out. Most importantly, he had an infectious passion for languages that got me hooked on not just Japanese, but all things language.

To The Many Uber Ninjetic Contributors & Typo Finders
Writing is a lonely profession, but the amazing support, questions, and feedback I’ve received from the growing Language Mastery army keeps me marching on. Onwards and upwards! Special thanks to the dedicated readers who emailed me feedback or pointed out embarrassing typos, broken links, and omissions (arranged in alphabetical order by last name):

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★ Elohim Falcón
★ Rosemary Fotheringham
★ Jack Hattaway

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★ Julie Pichon
★ Jeroen Vloothuis
★ Josiah Walton
★ Nick Winter
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Start Here

1

“The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.”

—Walt Disney
Welcome to Master Japanese! Today, you embark on a journey that will forever change your life. As Charlemagne said, “To have another language is to possess a second soul.” More than just learning new sounds, words, and grammar, Japanese ability enables you to see the world from a completely new perspective, better grasp—and operate within—Japanese culture, and even deepen your understanding of your native tongue and home country.

I wish you great success and am excited for the wild adventures and new opportunities that await you.

“One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.” —Frank Smith
How to Use this Guide

**Warning: Hard Work (and Fun Times) Ahead**

I must walk a fine line between motivating new learners and setting realistic expectations. On the one hand, I want would-be learners to know that anyone can learn a foreign language no matter their age, income, or zip code. You don’t need expensive, location-dependent classes, boring textbooks, or a new foreign address. What you need are the right tools—and more importantly—the motivation to use them day in and day out.

But right there is the real challenge of learning a language: *consistent action* and *requisite time on task*. This applies whether you are learning on your own or in a formal class, yet most courses and language products fail to set proper expectations about the time and effort involved in learning a language. Instead, they bombard us with marketing messages like “Learn a Language in 10 Days”. If we exercise common sense, we know that these are marketing lies, not pedagogical promises.

On the other extreme, you can find many blogs and forums belly aching about how difficult languages are (especially Japanese). Some claim you must take formal classes or you will forever speak like Tarzan. Others tell you it takes decades to reach fluency.

Fortunately, these pedantic pessimists are just as wrong as the marketing liars. The road to fluency may be long and windy, but the smart traveler can use the right tools, methods, and psychology to speed their progress, lighten their load, and have a hell of a lot more fun along the way.
The Learning Happens Out There, Not in This Guide

*Master Japanese* is NOT a textbook. This is by design. Textbook learning doesn’t work for most people because it treats language as a set of facts to be memorized, not the innate biological system it truly is. Nobody has ever learned to drive by reading the car’s owner’s manual, yet that is precisely the way most people try to learn foreign languages. Not us. Instead of trying to force Japanese into our brains through tedious rote learning, we’ll learn the fun, natural, adult-friendly way. Any adult, barring cognitive or physical disabilities, can acquire a language if they get sufficient exposure and practice. This is precisely what happened when you acquired your first language as a baby, and the process can happen even faster as an adult with the right materials, methods, and attitude.

“All textbooks prepare you for the real world as much as cookbooks prepare you for real cooking. YOU still have to make the cookies.” —Chris W. Hubbard

Master Japanese Guide Format & Tips

You Don’t Need to Read the Guide in Order

Think of this guide as a “choose your own adventure” book. I have tried to organize the guide in the most logical order possible, but feel free to jump around, reading chapters and sections in the order that feels most natural to you.

You Don’t Need to Read the Entire Guide

While I think you will get the most benefit from completing the guide cover to cover, it is certainly not necessary. Some people only want to learn how to speak Japanese, for example, while others want to focus more on reading and writing. I have therefore separated these skills (and the relevant tips, tools, and tech) into discrete sections. For those who have experience learning other languages (or who have already read one of my other language guides) but have yet to tackle Japanese, you can probably skip Chapters 1 and 2 and go straight to Chapters 3, 4, or 5.

All Web Links are Clickable

All online resources listed in the guide include a clickable link so you don’t have to waste your precious study time searching for sites or typing in ridiculously long URLs.
All Japanese Terms are Presented in Roumaji, Kanji & Kana

I hate when materials indicate Japanese terms solely in roumaji (ローマ字・ろうまじ), Japanese written in English letters. While this is supposed to make things “easier” for new learners who might not yet be able to read a word’s corresponding kanji (漢字・かんじ) or kana (仮名・かな), in reality, it just makes things easier for the publisher while denying you a valuable learning opportunity. Even if you can’t read them yet, it’s important to at least start getting used to kanji and kana from day one. Therefore, all Japanese words in this guide will be presented as follows:

★ The word in italicized roumaji.
★ The word’s corresponding kanji and hiragana in parentheses (separated with the・symbol).
★ An English translation when relevant.

For example:

nihongo (日本語・にほんご, “the Japanese language”)

Furthermore, words normally written in katakana (片仮名・かたかな) will be rewritten in hiragana (平仮名・ひらがな) to help you get used to both kana systems more quickly.

biiru (ビール・びいる, “beer”)

Japanese Names are Presented in Japanese Order

As you probably know, Japanese family names are written first, followed by a person’s given name (the opposite of English order). To help you get used to the Japanese convention and minimize potential ambiguity, I have written all Japanese names in this guide using the Japanese order (family names followed by given names). You will also notice that I write the roumaji version of family names in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. For example:

NATSUME Souseki (夏目漱石・なつめそうせき)

Gender-Specific Words are Marked

In Japanese, some words are used chiefly by either men or women. Keep a look out for the ♂️ symbol, which indicates terms used exclusively by men, and the ♀️ symbol for words used only by women.

“Zero Subjects” & “Zero Objects” are Shown in Brackets

Japanese frequently leaves off the subject and object of a sentence if they are obvious from the context. In such cases, I include the “missing” words in the English translation [within brackets].
FAQs & Attempted Answers

Why Did I Create Master Japanese?

“We do not need more language courses. We need courses on how to learn languages.” —Steve Kaufmann

This guide is designed to be just that: a course on how to learn Japanese. While the right teacher or tutor can be a big help, it is important to understand that nobody can “teach” you a language. Languages are “acquired” only if you get enough exposure to—and enough practicing using—the language in meaningful contexts. The incorrect belief that a teacher, course, or textbook will get a language into your head is one of the major reasons why traditional language courses don’t work. Well, that and the fact they tend to bore the heck out of learners, convince them they aren’t good at languages, and completely ignore how our brains evolved to learn, process, and produce language.

Why Should You Trust My Advice?

“The top 1% often succeed despite how they train, not because of it. Superior genetics, or a luxurious full-time schedule, make up for a lot. Career specialists can’t externalize what they’ve internalized. Second nature is hard to teach.” —Tim Ferriss, The 4-Hour Chef

I made just about every possible mistake when starting out in languages. I used terribly inefficient methods, slogged through boring materials I wouldn’t wish upon my worst enemy, and almost gave up more than a few times. But this is good news for you: struggling so much in the beginning and later correcting course makes me a much better language coach. You never want to learn from a “natural” who picks up new skills easily:

★ They will not know how to explain what they did and how they did it.
They will not be able to empathize with people who are struggling along in the dark.

I know your pain because I’ve felt it, too. I struggled along in languages just like most folks until I figured out that the traditional “tried and true” methods and materials used in most schools are anything but true.

I don’t have all the answers, but I do know the way up Japanese Mountain and I’ve written this guide to show you the way. I can’t promise you an easy climb, but I can guarantee that you’ll reach the top if you follow the tips, tools, and strategies laid out in this guide.

What Do I Mean By “Mastery”? 

First of all, “mastery” does not mean “perfection”. Such a thing doesn’t exist in languages. And even if it did, it would not be a “S.M.A.R.T. goal” (covered later in the guide) and is therefore irrelevant to our purposes. So if “mastery” does not equal “perfection”, what does it mean? I define “mastery” as follows:

The ability to use a language well for your communicative purposes.

That’s it. Mastery is completely relative to your personal and professional needs:

★ If you want a meaningful social life, then “mastery” might mean being able to understand and contribute to casual conversations at a quiet tea shop in Kyoto or a loud Tokyo dance club.

★ If you are a film fanatic, then “mastery” for you might mean being able to understand your favorite flick without relying on English (or even Japanese) subtitles.

★ If you are a hitherto monolingual Japanese-American, perhaps “mastery” entails finally being able to communicate well with relatives in their native language.

In any of these scenarios, “mastery” does not entail learning every last word you may hear or read. Even native Japanese speakers come across vocabulary they don’t know, or encounter kanji that they have forgotten how to write or pronounce. The key is to know enough Japanese that you can ask about the meaning of an unfamiliar word or character and then actually understand the answer.

Strive to constantly expand your vocabulary and improve your grammar, but remember that the focus should always be on quality over quantity. Just as in martial arts, having lots of moves is not as important as mastering a small set of techniques.

“I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.” — Bruce Lee
How Long Will it Take to Learn Japanese?

This is one of the most common questions I get from new learners and also one of the hardest to answer.

First of all, it all depends on what you mean by “learn”. Are you referring to conversational fluency and basic literacy or native-like proficiency? In the case of the former goal, a dedicated learner should be able to master enough core words and structures to have basic (but flowing) conversations in just a few months.

Continuing on at this pace, a year’s time should be enough to reach an “upper intermediate” level (roughly B2 in CEFR), marked by mastery of the most common 5,000 words of spoken Japanese and the most common 2,000 characters. This level allows you to handle the vast majority of situations you’re likely to encounter day to day, and enables you to at least guess your way through most newspapers, magazines, etc. You can of course keep learning and improving from there, but the law of diminishing returns starts to kick in quickly.

“To understand 95% of a language and become conversationally fluent may require 3 months of applied learning; to reach the 98% threshold could require 10 years. There is a point of diminishing returns where, for most people, it makes more sense to acquire more languages (or other skills) vs. add a 1% improvement per 5 years.” — Tim Ferriss, How to Learn Any Language in 3 Months

Why Do I Focus So Much on Psychology?

Your beliefs about the Japanese language—and your ability to learn it—can make the difference between success and failure.

During my time as an English teacher in Asia, I made careful observations about which students progressed and which didn’t. The difference between the two groups was rarely intelligence: many bright learners struggled to learn English while some relatively dim learners took off.

The students that succeeded were the one’s who:
★ Were motivated to learn.
★ Set good goals.
★ Made language learning an integral part of their lives.

Those that failed were the ones who:
★ Were unmotivated to learn.
★ Made overly ambitious goals (or none at all).
★ Only spent time with the language in the classroom.

While the right methods and materials are important, they matter not without the right attitude.
The 3 Learning Phases

While I don’t believe in formal milestones or proficiency levels, I do think it’s useful to break the language journey up into a few major “phases” (listed below) with different tasks, tools, and materials for each. However, only you will know when it’s time to move onto the next phase; not some teacher, textbook, vague progress chart, standardized test, or language school motivated more by profits than your progress.

Beginners: Master the Basics

If you are just starting out in Japanese or have been “studying” for some time without making any real progress, I recommend that you start with mastering the basics. No matter how long you’ve been learning something, it’s always helpful to go back to the foundations. The key at this stage is to build a strong foundation on which to place more advanced words and structures. Just as I’ve observed in martial arts training, new learners are often too eager to skip what they perceive as “easy” or “simple” and jump ahead to the flashy stuff. Don’t wait until you get kicked in the face to realize how important the fundamentals are...

“...my vision of the road to mastery—you start with the fundamentals, get a solid foundation fueled by understanding the principles of your discipline, then you expand and refine your repertoire, guided by your individual predisposition, while keeping in touch, however abstractly, with what you feel to be the essential core of the art.” — Josh Waitzkin, The Art of Learning
Learn Kana

If you want to learn to read and write Japanese, it all starts with kana (仮名・かな), the Japanese alphabet system (technically called a “syllabary” since it’s made up of syllables). Even if you only want to understand and speak Japanese, it is still a good idea to learn the kana as they will help familiarize you with the sounds of the language, and make it easier to look words up in the dictionary. Each kana symbol represents a distinct vowel a, i, u, e and o (あ, い, う, え, お) or a consonant-vowel combination like ka, ki, ku, ke or ko (か, き, く, け, こ). Note that there are two separate sets of kana symbols, hiragana (平仮名・ひらがな) and katakana (片仮名・かたかな). They both represent the same sounds, but differ in how they are used:

★ Hiragana. Used for verb and adjective endings, particles, words with rare kanji, and kanji pronunciations of Japanese origin in dictionaries.

★ Katakana. Used to represent foreign loan words, foreign names, sound effects, and kanji readings of Chinese origin in dictionaries.

Since you will encounter hiragana more often, I suggest learning that set of symbols first. But don’t make the mistake of “taking a break” after hiragana and procrastinating on the katakana front. You need both for full literacy in Japanese, so don’t delay.

⇒ See the “Learn Kana” section.

Begin Learning “Standard Use” Kanji

Although many advise learners to hold off on kanji, I think this is a big mistake. First of all, learning Chinese characters can be quite easy if you follow the advice in this guide. It will of course take time, but won’t come with the nasty side effects faced by students learning by rote memory alone. Secondly, the sooner you begin learning kanji, the sooner you will be able to read and enjoy authentic Japanese materials; greatly expanding the pool of potential learning tools and the enjoyment that goes with it.

⇒ See the “Learn Kanji” section.

Learn Common Words & Phrases

Buy a good phrasebook (I suggest Lonely Planet’s Japanese Phrasebook & Dictionary) and begin going through it from the beginning. Try to complete at least a page a day. Though they have their limitations, phrasebooks are one of the best sources of authentic, common language that you will need on a daily basis. Another strategy is to memorize the most frequent 500 to 1,000 words in Japanese. According one analysis, the most frequent 100 words in Japanese account for over half of all written materials, while 1,000 words takes you to over 75%!

⇒ See the “Choose a Phrasebook” section.

If you bought the Complete Package, print out the “Most Common 1000 Words in Japanese” PDF.
Master Pronunciation & Intonation

Proper pronunciation is the single most important skill in language learning. Even with broken grammar and few words, you can often make yourself if you have clear, accurate pronunciation patterns. One of the best ways to improve your overall pronunciation (including diction, rhythm, intonation, etc.) is using either Michel Thomas or Pimsleur. Aim to complete at least one lesson a day.

➔ See the “Japanese Audio Courses” section.
➔ See the “Master Pronunciation” section.

Listen to Basic, Learner Specific Podcasts

Jumping right into authentic content works for some, but is probably a bit overwhelming for most learners, leading to frustration instead of progress. As Yoda would say (with surprisingly Japanese-like grammar), “Frustration, a path to the Dark Side it is.” To avoid “going Anakin”, I suggest that you find some good newbie level programs that have a format and host you like.

➔ See the “Japanese Podcasts” section.

Choose a Basic Japanese Grammar Guide

As you have probably guessed by now, I am not a big fan of formal grammar study. But I do think that a some cursory review of Japanese grammar can be helpful, just so long as it does not replace what really makes the difference: spending enough time listening, speaking, reading, and writing the language. If you do enough of these four activities, even with no formal grammar study, you will eventually internalize the fundamental Japanese structures. Thinking about Japanese grammar consciously is no substitute for this natural acquisition. But peeking at a grammar book or website once in a while can help you become more aware of the patterns you encounter in your input activities and answer some nagging questions you may have.

➔ See the “Choose a Japanese Grammar Guide” section.
Intermediate Learners: Sharpen Your Sword

Now that you have learned the basics and been exposed to a fair amount of Japanese, it’s time to sharpen your sword with more hands on application, some authentic content, and lots of feedback on your speaking and writing.

Become Conversationally Fluent

As scary as it may seem, it’s imperative that you spend as much time as you can speaking with native Japanese speakers or tutors. You can’t get better at speaking unless you actually **speak**!

Find a tutor you like on iTalki.com, make friends using social media, attend local Meetup.com conversation groups, or if you already live in Japan, talk to just about anyone, anywhere. In addition to furthering your motivation to keep learning, speaking also helps to “show you where your gaps are” as Steve Kaufmann points out in our interview.

➔ See the “Work With a Tutor” section.

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If you bought the Complete Package, don’t miss my interview with Steve Kaufmann.

Continue Learning “Standard Use” Kanji

By now, you have gotten the hang of learning new characters, though you probably still have quite a few to go. Don’t let yourself get overwhelmed. Just keep laying one brick at a time and before you know it, your “kanji castle” will be complete!

➔ See the “Learn Kanji” section.

Learn the Most Frequent 3,000 Japanese Words

Once you’ve mastered the most frequent 500 to 1,000 words in Japanese, it’s time to make the next jump to 3,000 known words. This which will take you to over 85% of the language you are likely to encounter on a daily basis!

➔ See “The Most Commonly Used Japanese Words by Frequency”.

Listen to Intermediate & Advanced Learner Podcasts

Learner specific podcasts are probably still your best bet, though by now you will be more than ready to move past the beginner level programs to intermediate shows. You may also want to begin listening to some podcasts intended for native speakers, but only if they don’t stress you out.

➔ See the “Japanese Podcasts” section.
Watch Japanese Anime, TV & Movies with Japanese Subtitles

It might still be a little difficult for you, but try to begin watching Japanese anime, TV, and movies with Japanese subtitles, instead of English. This will accomplish 3 tasks at once: 1) reinforcing the kanji you have learned so far, 2) helping you to create a direct link between pronunciation and characters, and 3) getting you to think in Japanese instead of translating to and from English.

➔ See the “Anime, TV & Movies” section.

Advanced Learners: Get Your Black Belt

In martial arts, a black belt means you can both apply and defend against all the basic techniques of that style and are now ready to move on to more advanced material. Contrary to popular belief, it does not mean you are now an “expert” who knows all there is to know. The advanced phase of your Japanese language journey is much the same. Once you’ve mastered the basics and sharpened your sword, it’s time to fill in the holes, learn more advanced material, and continue refining what you’ve previously learned.

Enjoy Podcasts Intended for Native Speakers

It’s time to move past the learner-specific podcasts and begin listening to programs intended for native speakers of Japanese. At this level, the pool of potential listening content expands significantly, with programs available for nearly every possible interest.

➔ See the “Japanese Podcast Directories” section.

Watch Anime, TV & Movies with All Subtitles Turned Off

In the beginning stage, I recommended watching anime, TV, and movies with English subtitles to build understanding and context. In the intermediate phase, I recommended watching with Japanese subtitles to build connections between the spoken and written language and reinforce kanji knowledge. Finally in the advanced stage, I suggest watching without any subtitles so you can really test your understanding and focus on fluency. You can repeat programs you’ve already watched so that there is a clear context to stand on, or if you’re feeling adventurous, you can dive head first into new content and figure things out as you go!

➔ See the “Anime, TV & Movies” section.
Begin Learning Upper-Level Characters

Once you’ve learned all 2,136 “standard use” jouyou kanji (常用漢字・じょうようかんじ), it’s time to move on to upper-level characters which you will encounter if you study at a Japanese university, work for a Japanese company, or read any technical or industry-specific materials. Just as before, the key is to use what James Heisig calls “imaginative memory”, not tedious rote learning.

➔ Get “Remembering the Kanji 3”.

Read Japanese Blogs, Newspapers, Magazines & Novels

You have probably peeked at some authentic written material already in the beginning and intermediate stages, but now that you can recognize the vast majority of the characters and words without reaching for the dictionary every 3 seconds, it’s time to jump into written Japanese with both feet. You can now begin enjoying reading for reading’s sake and forget that you’re actually learning Japanese.

➔ See the “Japanese Newspapers” section.
➔ See the “Japanese Magazines” section.
➔ See the “Japanese Books & Literature” section.

Learn All Levels of Japanese Formality

“Moving parts in rubbing contact require lubrication to avoid excessive wear. Honorifics and formal politeness provide lubrication where people rub together. Often the very young, the untravelled, the naive, the unsophisticated deplore these formalities as ‘empty’, ‘meaningless’, or ‘dishonest’, and scorn to use them. No matter how ‘pure’ their motives, they thereby throw sand into machinery that does not work too well at best.” –Robert Heinlein, *Time Enough for Love*

Taking the trouble to master formal Japanese, known as keigo (敬語・けいご), will set you apart from nearly all foreign language learners, and even younger Japanese native speakers who nowadays must often be trained in keigo by their employers. This does not mean, however, that keigo is difficult; it is just not used enough in daily speech to become familiar as quickly as less formal language. You can see the same pattern in English vocabulary: everyone knows the word “dull” but how many of you know “insipid” without reaching for the dictionary?

➔ See the “Japanese Honorifics” section.
“In language learning, it is attitude, not aptitude, that determines success.”
—Steve Kaufmann
Learning Japanese may not be easy, but it’s certainly not complicated. All you have to do is “show up” and give your brain the exposure and practice it needs to make sense of the new sounds, patterns, and symbols. Do this enough times in meaningful contexts, and your brain will automatically perform its amazing evolutionary feat: building the robust procedural memories that enable you to understand and produce Japanese at lightning speed.

“Eighty percent of success is showing up.”
―Woody Allen
Kill the Myths

One of the first steps in learning how to learn is killing off destructive false beliefs about language learning in general, and the Japanese language in particular.

Myth: You’re Not Good at Languages

Q: What do you call someone who can speak 2 languages?
   A: Bilingual.

Q: What do you call someone who can speak 3 languages?
   A: Trilingual.

Q: What do you call someone who can speak 4 languages?
   A: Quadrilingual.

Q: What do you call someone who can speak 1 language?
   A: American.

Ha, ha, ha! My sides! My sides!

But seriously folks, it is time to put this myth to rest. Yes, most adults (especially Americans it seems) fail to learn foreign languages well despite mandatory study in high school and university, but this failure is a product of bad attitudes, bad materials, and bad methods, not a lack of innate ability.

Though outliers like Daniel Tammet have demonstrated how extraordinary cognitive abilities can be used to learn languages extremely quickly (he learned enough Icelandic in 7 days to handle a media interview in the language!), the good news for us non-savants is that there exists another tried and true path to fluency:

Extensive exposure coupled with hard work and perseverance.

If you spend enough time with the language (sorry, it’s going to take much more than 7 days for most of us), your brain will eventually make sense of the language. All you have to do is show up and put in the effort on a consistent basis. It’s a matter of time and effort, not brains.
“A lot of people have this misconception that you have to be smart to tackle big undertakings like learning Japanese, or anything else for that matter. The idea seems to be that if you’re not smart enough to be immediately good at something, then it will be an uphill battle the whole way. But surprisingly, both conventional wisdom and modern science tells us that that is completely wrong. Being smart is nice and all, but it turns out success is less about brains and more about hard work and perseverance. —Hashi, You Don’t Have to Be a Genius to Learn Japanese

Myth: You’re Too Old to Learn Japanese

Contrary to popular belief, children do not necessarily learn languages more quickly or easily than adults. The wee little ones actually struggle quite a bit with their first languages, and spend years actively listening to the input around them before uttering a single word. And when they do start speaking, children (like my adorable nephews) make many of the same mistakes in grammar and pronunciation as non-native adult learners! As babies, we simply don’t yet have the language to put our linguistic frustrations into words.

But like some cruel evolutionary trick, by the time we have the requisite words and syntax at our disposal, we have long since forgotten how much time, effort, and trial-and-error it took us to reach fluency.

It’s certainly true that few ever reach the same level of fluency in second languages as in their first, but so what? We can get pretty darn close with enough time and effort, and more importantly, we can reach conversational fluency far more quickly than children if we capitalize on the adult learner’s myriad advantages:

Adults Already Have Massive Vocabularies to Draw On

As an adult, you already know what tricky words like “metaphor” and “subtle” mean. All you have to do is learn their equivalents in Japanese: inyu (隠喩・いんゆ) and kibi-na (機微な・きびな) respectively. Good luck teaching a 4 year old child either of these words in Japanese or English!

Adult Learners Can Seek Out Materials & Contexts

Unlike infants who are dependent on the listening input they happen to hear around them from their parents, peers, TV, etc., the adult learner has the means to seek out Japanese input via the Internet, Japanese tutors, and international travel.
Adults Know How to Learn

You have already learned how to drive, operate the printer at work, program the clock on your DVD player, and fix that toilet that keeps running for some reason. You learned all of these things more quickly than any child ever could because you have already learned so many other things.

Every task you learn helps you pick up the next, just as every language you delve into makes acquiring another that much easier.

Adult Learners Have a Choice

Having the choice whether or not to learn Japanese is a highly under-appreciated advantage. The freedom to choose significantly increases motivation and enjoyment, which in turn improves retention.

As I observed in East Asia, many people develop a hatred for English learning since it is a mandatory subject. If it were made an optional course, I guarantee that more people would enjoy learning the language, and their skill levels would surely rise.

Our Brains Can Retain Their Plasticity Long Into Old Age

Many scientists now believe that the human brain remains “plastic” (that is, able to change, grow, and rewire itself) long into old age. For most people, “I’m too old to learn” is a psychological—not physiological—limitation. A great real life example is Steve Kaufmann, the founder of LingQ.com, who speaks eleven languages, five of which he learned after the age of 50!

If you bought the Complete Package, don’t miss my interview with Steve Kaufmann.

How plastic your brain remains depends on how you treat it, however, so all those recommendations you hear about eating right and getting sufficient exercise and sleep pertain just as much to language learning as they do to your waistline. Not sure where to start? Here are a few articles to help you transition to more brain-friendly patterns of eating and sleeping.

➔ “The Beginner’s Guide to the Paleo Diet” by Nerd Fitness
➔ “The Definitive Guide to Sleep” by Mark Sisson
Myth: You Have to Move to Japan

“...where you are isn’t what decides whether or not you’ll be successful. Attitude beats latitude (and longitude) every time. It’s more about creating an immersion environment, exposing yourself to native speakers, and doing everything you can in that language.” —Benny Lewis, Fluent in 3 Months

Is it ideal to learn Japanese in Japan? Yes.

Is it a mandatory condition? Absolutely not.

Let me be clear: living abroad was one of the most amazing experiences in my life, and I go back to visit Japan as often as possible. While living overseas can certainly provide Japanese learners many advantages, it’s critical to understand that it’s not a requirement for success. In today’s world, “I can’t learn Japanese because I live in rural Kansas” is an excuse, not a reality. With Internet access, a little creativity, and a lot of hard work, you really can learn any language, anywhere.

On the flip side, living abroad is no guarantee that you will pick up the language. While immersion is essential, language acquisition depends on active learning, not passive osmosis. Consider the ridiculously high number of Western expats who spend years in Japan and never reach even a moderate level of fluency in Japanese.

Or take the case of English speakers learning French in New Brunswick, Canada: despite being surrounded by French both in and outside of the classroom for 12 years, a government report showed that only 0.68 percent reached even an intermediate level in the language!

No my friends, exposure is not enough. You have to be hungry to learn and do everything you can to actively assimilate the language.

You Can Always Find Native Speakers to Practice With

There are no shortages of language learning communities, exchange sites, and tutoring services online today, with more and more popping up every year. And with the advent of free VOIP (voice over IP) services like Skype, you can talk with native Japanese speakers right from your computer or smartphone no matter where you live.

If you prefer speaking face to face, find a local Japanese language and culture group on Meetup.com, or if you live near a university, see about volunteering to help tutor Japanese exchange students.

You Can Practice Listening & Speaking On Your Own

It certainly helps (both for motivation and getting valuable feedback on your language usage) to speak with native speakers, and I suggest doing so as much as you can.

But in cases where you don’t have anyone to talk with, you can always get more listening input via podcasts, streaming Japanese radio online, watching YouTube videos, etc., and then practice using what you’ve learned by recording an audio journal, talking to your smartphone as if you’re on a call, or just saying in your head what you would say in various scenarios you are likely to encounter.

Myth: You Need to Attend Classes

Too many would-be Japanese learners use the “time and money” excuse to put off their language learning adventure, quoting the exorbitant costs of formal classes and the difficulty of committing to pre-defined hours week in and week out. Fortunately, you do not need a classroom, or even a teacher, to learn Japanese.

Don’t get me wrong: having spent many years in language classrooms as both learner and teacher, I know first hand how important a teacher can be:

★ They can help motivate students to learn by creating a cultural context for the language.

★ They can scour the web for useful materials that fit one’s unique needs and interests (something a native speaker can do far faster than a language learner).

★ They can point out your mistakes in speech and writing and let you know if something sounds natural or not.

My point is just that none of these things require a teacher or school:

★ You can motivate yourself (and create a cultural context to boot) by learning more about Japan through film, food, etc.

★ A Japanese tutor or friend can help suggest materials that fit your interests and needs.

★ Any Japanese native speaker can tell you if your word usage or structures sound “right” or “wrong” even if they don’t know why. In language learning, the “whys” are perhaps interesting, but they’re irrelevant to learning the “whats” of fluent speech.
Myth: Japanese is Difficult

Japanese is indeed quite different from English, but “different” needn’t be synonymous with “difficult”. Yes, learning Japanese, like any language, will pose unique challenges, but believing that “Japanese is a really difficult language” does you no good. All you accomplish is creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of dwelling on the empty half of the Japanese glass, why not focus more on the many ways in which Japanese is actually quite easy?

A Massive Number of English “Loan Words”

If you grew up speaking English, congratulations! You won the Linguistic Lottery! From day one in Japanese, you will have a massive pre-existing vocabulary to draw on thanks to the thousands and thousands of English words borrowed into the Japanese language to date. These “foreign loan words”, or gairaigo (外来語), offer native speakers of English a massive head start, allowing you to understand and communicate a great deal of information even with shaky Japanese grammar and zero kanji knowledge.

Here is a small taste of the Japanese arsenal English speakers already have at their disposal:

★ “mic” → maiku (マイク)
★ “table” → teeburu (テーブル)
★ “Internet” → intaanetto (インターネット)
★ “romantic” → romanchikku (ロマンチック)
★ “driveshaft” → doraibushafuto (ドライブシャフト)

→ Check out Benny’s Japanese music video sung entirely in gairaigo. You will of course need to learn the “Japanified” pronunciation of English loan words, but the phonetic patterns are highly predictable and consistent. All you need to do is learn katakana (something you can do over the weekend), and then familiarize yourself with how English sounds are transferred into Japanese. A few key patterns to help you get started:

★ English loan words adopt the consonant-vowel, consonant-vowel pattern found in Japanese. So you can be sure that any English consonant clusters, such as the ‘dr’ in “drive” will get extra vowels added in the middle. In this case, ‘d’ becomes do (ド), followed by ra (ラ).

★ In Japanese, no words end in a consonant (with the exceptions of n), so if an English loan word has a consonant sound at the end (e.g. “mic”), you can be sure that the Japanese equivalent will have a vowel tacked on: maiku.
Once you have the phonetic patterns down, a powerful language hack is at your disposal: When in doubt about how to say a given word in Japanese, just say the English word you know using Japanese syllables. More times than not, you will be understood.

Even if a given English loan word is not actually used in Japanese, chances are good that people will have “learned” (i.e. memorized but not really acquired) the English word in high school or university. Since most Japanese learners of English add little *katakana* reading guides above English words to approximate their pronunciation, they will better recognize English words when wrapped in Japanese pronunciation. Or even more so when written out on paper. This habit may be bad for their English, but is at least good for your ability to communicate.

Lastly, I should point out that there are occasional differences in meaning between English loan words and their Japanese derivations. But radical semantic changes are few, and even when there are significant gaps, the comedic effect is usually enough to make the words stick on their own.

Perfect example: I loved telling all my friends back home that I lived in a “mansion” while in Japan. It was the truth! What they didn’t know is that the loan word *manshon* (マンション・まんしょん) actually refers to an apartment, not a palatial residence.

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### No Need to Inflect Verbs for Different Pronouns

Unlike many languages that have different verb forms to match different pronouns (e.g. “I *am*…”, “You/We/They *are*…”, and “He/She/It *is*…”), in Japanese, you use the same verb form no matter who is doing it!

Take the verb “to eat” for example. *En español*, you have to learn 6 different verb forms for just the present tense (one for each pronoun group), plus all the myriad tense variations. In Japanese, you only need to learn one single verb form for each tense. No matter who does the eating, the verb *taberu* (食べる・たべる, “eat”) stays exactly the same!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I eat.</th>
<th>Yo como.</th>
<th>Taberu.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He / She eats.</td>
<td>Él/Ella come.</td>
<td>Taberu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We eat.</td>
<td>Nosotros comemos.</td>
<td>Taberu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You (pl.) / They eat.</td>
<td>Uds./Ellos comen.</td>
<td>Taberu.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You do have to learn different verb tenses in Japanese of course, and there are different levels of formality to consider, but hey, at least matching pronouns and verbs is one less thing to worry about when you’re starting out. Don’t look a gift linguistic horse in the mouth!

No Need to Inflect Adjectives for Different Nouns

There are no “masculine”, “feminine” or “neuter” nouns in Japanese, which should come as a relief to learners of Romance languages that require us to change adjective forms to match the noun they are hanging out with. Buddha be praised!

In Japan, you can just order your dark beer instead of trying to remember whether the noun “beer” is feminine or masculine as you would have to in Spanish:

“Let’s see… I really want a dark beer. Cerveza is feminine I think… Or is it masculine? It seems masculine. Just think of all the dudes with beer bellies. But it ends with an ‘a’ so I think it should be a feminine noun. Okay, assuming it is indeed feminine, I need to use the feminine form of the adjective for “dark”… Hmm… I think it’s oscura…”

Meanwhile, the waiter has come and gone and you are left to wait in thirsty frustration. Halfway around the world, the Japanese learner is already on his second round of gender-free kuro biiru (黒ビール・くろびいる, “dark/black beer”).

You Can Leave Out Lots of Words in Japanese

Not only is there only one verb form for all pronouns in Japanese, the pronoun itself can usually be left off (a phenomenon called “pro-drop” in linguistics).

So instead of saying “I am jealous of you” you can just say “jealous”:

urayamashii (羨ましい・うらやましい, “[I am] jealous [of you]”)

The same thing also works with objects. For example, if someone asks you if you have eaten dinner yet, you can just say “Yes, ate”:

hai, tabemashita (はい,食べた・はい、たべました, “Yes, [I] ate [dinner]”)

Japanese Kana Has One-to-One Pronunciation

Japanese is a syllabic language, made up of 45 basic syllables. While the number 45 may sound more intimidating than the 26 letters found in English, keep in mind that each Japanese syllable can be pronounced only one way. This is in stark contrast to English, which despite having fewer letters actually contains far more sounds. Depending on the word (and where in the word it
lies), most English letters can be pronounced myriad different ways.

Take the letter ‘e’ for example:

★ It can be pronounced as a “short e” (ĕ or /ɛ/) like in “empty”.
★ It can be pronounced as a “long e” (ē or /i/) like in “key”.
★ It can be pronounced as a “long a” (ā or /ei/) like in “résumé”.
★ It can be pronounced as a “schwa” (/ə/) like in “taken”.
★ It can be silent (especially at the end of words) like in “axe”.

Complex stuff!

Pick any Japanese kana on the other hand, and no matter where it’s used, it will be pronounced one—and only one—way. The Japanese e sound for example (written ｶ in Hiragana) is always pronounced as a “short e” (ĕ or /ɛ/). It doesn’t change if the syllable comes at the beginning, middle, or end of a word.

There are, however, two important exceptions. When used as grammatical particles, the following kana take on special pronunciations:

★ は is pronounced wa not ha when used as a topic particle.
★ へ is pronounced e not he when used as a direction particle meaning “to” or “toward”.

See the “Japanese Particles” section for more info.

Japanese “Recycles” Lots of Kana

As any good citizen knows, we should do our best to reduce, reuse, and recycle. To fulfill its civic duty, Japanese greatly reduces the number of potential kana you need to learn by recycling a small set of basic symbols to represent a much larger number of sounds. The key to this linguistic efficiency is the use of little double slash marks called dakuten (濁点・だくてん, “voiced marks”). As the name implies, these diacritic marks transform each of the “voiceless” sounds in Japanese into their “voiced” counterparts. Here are a few examples (note that the only difference between the kana on the left and right is the dakuten in the upper-right corner):

★ ka = か → ga = が
★ sa = さ → za = ざ
★ ta = た → da = だ

Just think: without these little marks, you would have to learn dozens of additional kana symbols. Thank you dakuten!

Japanese Presents Few New Sounds to English Speakers

The vast majority of Japanese sounds have direct (or at least very similar) equivalents in English. This is great news for the Japanese learner, but tough times for Japanese learners of English. Consider yourself lucky! You’ve already mastered English’s notorious ‘l’ and ‘r’ distinctions, for example, and will never have
to endure the embarrassment of saying “erection” when you meant “election”!

There are only two Japanese sounds you will likely struggle with in the beginning:

★ The Japanese ‘r’ sounds: ra (라), ri (り), ru (る), re (れ), and ro (ろ). They sound somewhere between an ‘r’ and ‘d’, pronounced with a quick flip of the tongue somewhat like the rolled ‘r’ in Spanish. You can find a similar sound in American English buried in the middle of the word “water”. When sandwiched between vowels, we Yanks turn the poor little ‘t’ into what’s called a “flap”, which is precisely what the Japanese ‘r’ sound is, too.

★ The Japanese ‘tsu’ sound (ツ). We actually have a similar sound in English (the ‘ts’ in words like “rats”), but the difference is that we never pronounce such a sound at the beginning of syllables in English as they do in Japanese.

But worry not! Your ears and mouth will eventually get the hang of these sounds with enough listening and speaking practice. Just do your best to imitate native speakers, and make sure to record yourself to better gauge your pronunciation and monitor your progress over time. You may even want to use software like Audacity to see how the waveform of your speech compares to that of native speakers. As Peter Drucker said, “What gets measured gets managed.”

→ Download Audacity (Mac & Windows, free).

Japanese is Not a Tonal Language

Unlike Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Thai, etc., Japanese is not a tonal language. Hooray! The Japanese language does sometimes differentiate meaning using a high-low distinction called “pitch accent”, or koutei akusento (高低アクセント・こうていあくせんと) in Japanese, but the good news is that you do not need to learn a specific tone for each and every syllable like you do in languages like Chinese. And in the fairly infrequent cases when pitch is used to distinguish meaning, the context will almost always do the heavy lifting for you. For example: Even though the word hashi can mean “chopsticks” (箸), “bridge” (橋), or “edge” (端) depending on the pitch accent (high-low, low-high, and flat in this case), you will know that somebody wants you to pass the “chopsticks” when at a restaurant, not a “bridge” or the “edge” of the table.

Knowing Kanji Allows You to Guess the Meaning of New Words

Once you know the meaning of individual Chinese characters, you can often guess the meaning of compound words they combine to create. To do the same thing in English requires extensive knowledge of Latin, Greek, Germanic, and so on. My favorite example of this is the English word “homonym”. Unless you know the Greek etymology of this term (homo = “one and the same”, -onym (-ōnymos) “named”), it is all but impossible to dig out its meaning without the help of a dictionary. The Japanese equivalent dou-on-igi-go (同音異義語・どうおんいぎご, “same
sound different meaning word”), on the other hand, can be easily guessed at with just a modicum of Japanese knowledge.

**Phonetic Patterns Allow You to Guess the Pronunciation of New Kanji**

Contrary to popular belief, most Chinese characters are not pictographs. The vast majority are in fact “pictophonetic” compounds comprised of two chunks: a “phonetic indicator” that points to the character’s pronunciation, and a “semantic indicator” relating to its meaning. This may sound complex, but is actually very good news for language learners! Learning the most common phonetic and semantic chunks (or “radicals”) enables you to make educated guesses about the pronunciation and meaning of new characters. For example, all of the following kanji share the same phonetic chunk, 工 (“craft”). It is pronounced kou (こう), and lo and behold, each of the following kanji it contains are all pronounced kou:

★ 赤 (“crimson”)
★ 虹 (“rainbow”)
★ 江 (“creek”)
★ 攻 (“aggression”)
★ 功 (“achievement”)

Chances are good that if you come across a new kanji that includes the 工 phonetic chunk, it too will be pronounced kou.

**Myth: Japanese is Vague**

We can thank the Japanese themselves for the myth that “Japanese is a vague language”. This misconception is well exemplified in an NPR interview with a member of the Tokyo String Quartet who claimed that English allowed him and other Japanese members of the ensemble to communicate more effectively than in Japanese (they began speaking in English once a non-Japanese member joined the group). As Dr. Jay Rubin points out in *Making Sense of Japanese*, the perceived difference in communication ease is a matter of culture, not linguistics:

“While he no doubt believes this, he is wrong. The Japanese language can express anything it needs to, but Japanese social norms often require people to express themselves indirectly or incompletely.” —Jay Rubin, *Making Sense of Japanese*

Directness in communication is usually frowned upon in Japanese culture, while it is often the primary goal in most English speaking countries (except among politicians and lawyers of course, but they’re just meat popsicles in suits). Anyone who has lived in Japan or done business with a Japanese company knows that this difference in communication style can be a major source of frustration and cross-cultural miscommunication. As things go, it’s usually the cultural—not linguistic—barriers that cause
tempers to flair, negotiations to break down, and relationships to fail.

So as you learn to speak, read, and write Japanese, make sure to give just as much attention to the “language” left out of the conversation and off the page. Realize that few Japanese people will ever say “No” outright, opting instead for statements like “It’s under consideration”, “I’ll give it some thought”, or “It’s difficult at this time”. Know that when someone says “Chotto…” (ちょっと, “a little”) and then breathes in through their teeth as they as they rub the back of their head, that they are expressing apprehension or disapproval but are culturally forbidden to say what exactly they are “a little” (or likely, “very”) unsure about.

**Myth: Japanese is Illogical**

Given its ethnocentric undertones, I have little patience for this argument. It makes the false assumption that English is somehow more intuitive or well-structured by comparison, when in fact, no natural languages are “logical” per se (aside from purposefully designed languages like Esperanto). As languages evolve organically over great expanses of time, they inevitably take on illogical quirks and inconsistent patterns. English is no exception:

“There is no egg in eggplant, and you will find neither pine nor apple in a pineapple. Hamburgers are not made from ham, English muffins were not invented in England, and French Fries were not invented in France. Sweetmeats are confectionery, while sweetbreads, which are not sweet, are meat. And why is it that a writer writes, but fingers do not fing, humdingers do not hum, and hammers don’t ham. If the plural of tooth is teeth, shouldn’t the plural of booth be beeth?” —Richard Lederer, Crazy English: The Ultimate Joy Ride through Our Language

While it is perfectly natural to compare and contrast Japanese with English, try to avoid making value judgements about the two languages. Human languages are the way they are; why they are that way is an interesting question for historical and comparative linguists, but has little to do with language learning.

➔ For more English quirks, check out Benny’s reading of “The Chaos”.

**Myth: It Will Take You Decades to Learn Japanese**

Yes, it is going to take you quite a bit of time to learn Japanese, or any foreign language for that matter. But by “quite a bit” I mean thousands of hours, not decades. That said, if you only study Japanese in a traditional classroom setting, live in an English speaking bubble even within Japan, and believe that Japanese is a “difficult” language, it may very well take you ten years to learn the language, if not many decades more!
“Language is infinitely expansive (much like cooking) and therefore horribly overwhelming if unfiltered... *What* you study is more important than *how* you study.”

—Tim Ferriss, The 4-Hour Chef
Mastering a **small** set of core words, characters, and structures enables you to understand a **large** percentage of the Japanese you will encounter day to day.

“We should remember the warning of the wise Grail knight in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade: ‘You must choose, but choose wisely, for as the true Grail will bring you life, the false Grail will take it from you.’ Choose the highest-yield material and you can be an idiot and enjoy stunning success. Choose poorly and, as the Grail knight implied, you’re screwed no matter what. You’ll chase your own tail for years.” —Tim Ferriss, The 4-Hour Chef
Grammar study is one of the most hotly debated topics among language teachers, applied linguists, polyglots, bloggers, and forum trolls.

★ On the one extreme, devout grammar mavens claim that you must formally study a language’s grammar lest you forever produce broken, disjointed, unintelligible streams of words.

★ On the other end of the spectrum, you find people saying that you should ignore grammar completely. It just gets in the way of learning to communicate quickly.

As is the case with most things in life, the truth lies somewhere closer to the middle... Ultimately, you can only internalize proper Japanese grammar through extensive input and active output, during which most of the heavy lifting is done by your brain at a subconscious level. However, a little bit of grammar study can be of great help for adult learners if it is used in conjunction with—not as a replacement for—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition to maximizing your exposure and active practice, here are a few tips to help you master essential patterns and overcome mistakes.

Master Your Self-Intro

Mastering your self-introduction should be one of your first goals when starting out in Japanese. This is not narcissism; not only will it prove extremely useful in your day to day life (especially when you first arrive in Japan), but your well-rehearsed bio will help familiarize you with common grammar patterns in the language, and help put native Japanese speakers at ease. Some folks get quite nervous about the prospect of having to speak English with foreigners, so your flowing Japanese introduction will show them there’s no need to panic. Here’s what to do:

★ Write out a brief bio discussing your family, job, background, interests, why you are learning the language, why you’re visiting the country, etc.
★ Have this translated into Japanese by a native speaker, tutor, or teacher. Or for a good challenge, try translating yourself first and having your tutor add corrections and suggestions.

★ Have your tutor record the script aloud. Make sure they read at a normal pace with natural intonation: you don’t want your bio to sound like an over-enunciated textbook dialogue.

★ Listen to the recording many times as you read the transcript.

★ Listen again many more times without reading the transcript.

★ Record yourself reading your bio, doing as much as you can from memory, glancing only at the transcript when necessary.

★ Have your tutor go through your recording, noting any mistakes you may have made.

★ Rinse and repeat as many times as necessary until your tutor cannot identify any discernible mistakes and you know your bio frontwards and backwards.

Memorize The “Deconstruction Dozen”

The “Deconstruction Dozen” or “12-Sentence Audit” (popularized by fellow language addict Tim Ferriss) is an excellent way to kick-start your understanding of basic Japanese grammar without getting lost in minutiae or overwhelmed by excess. While 12 sentences obviously won’t teach you everything you need to know about Japanese grammar, they reveal plenty of useful high-yield patterns that you will need for everyday communication:

★ How conjugations are formed in the language (if at all).

★ How possession is handled.

★ How/if “helping verbs” are used.

★ How past, present, and future tenses are expressed.

★ How negation works.

★ How questions are formed.

★ Whether direct and indirect objects are treated differently.

Here now are Tim’s 12 sentences translated into Japanese for your learning pleasure:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The apple is red.</td>
<td>(sono) ringo-wa akai desu.</td>
<td>(その) りんごは赤いです。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It is John's apple.</td>
<td>(sore-wa) jon-no ringo desu.</td>
<td>(それは) ジョン のリンゴです。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I give John the apple.</td>
<td>(watashi-wa) jon-ni (sono) ringo-wo agemasu.</td>
<td>私はジョンに (その) リンゴを上げます。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>We give him the apple.</td>
<td>watashitachi-wa kare-ni (sono) ringo-wo agemasu.</td>
<td>私達は彼に (その) リンゴを上げます。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>He gives it to John.</td>
<td>kare-wa (sore-wo) jon-ni agemasu.</td>
<td>彼は (それを) ジョンに上げます。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>She gives it to him.</td>
<td>kanojo-wa (sore-wo) kare-ni agemasu.</td>
<td>彼女は (それを) 彼に上げます。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Is the apple red?</td>
<td>(sono) ringo-wa akai desu ka?</td>
<td>(そのり) リンゴは赤いですか？</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The apples are red.</td>
<td>(sono/sorera-no) ringo-wa akai desu.</td>
<td>(その・それらの) リンゴは赤いです。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I must give it to him.</td>
<td>(watashi-wa sore-wo) kare-ni agenakereba naimasen.</td>
<td>私はそれを 彼に上げなければなりません。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I want to give it to her.</td>
<td>(watashi-wa sore-wo) kanojo-ki agetai desu.</td>
<td>私はそれを 彼女に上げたいです。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I’m going to know tomorrow.</td>
<td>(watashi-wa) ashita, shiru deshou.</td>
<td>(私は明日、知りましょう。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I can’t eat the apple.</td>
<td>(watashi-wa sono) ringo-wo taberu-koto-ga dekimasen.</td>
<td>(私はその) リンゴを食べることが出来ません。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identify & Fix Grammar Mistakes Early On

“Practice doesn't make perfect. Practice makes permanent!” — Antonio Graceffo

One of the most hotly debated issues among applied linguists is “fossilization”, a phenomenon related not to dinosaur bones but those pesky mistakes in one’s pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar that have been practiced the wrong way so many times they have become entrenched habits. While such problems can be fixed with enough targeted practice and a whole lot of patience, it’s far easier to nip them in the bud before they grow roots. To that end:

Encourage Correction of Your Mistakes

In an effort to spare your feelings and preserve “face”, most native Japanese speakers will politely ignore your mistakes. While they may resist, do everything you can to encourage Japanese friends, colleagues, tutors, and exchange partners to point out mistakes you make in:

★ Pronunciation.
★ Word usage.
★ Syntax and grammar.

Most native speakers won’t be able to explain why something is wrong (unless they have experience teaching the language), but any native speaker, even a child, can tell you what is wrong.

Have Your Tutor Take Detailed Notes

In tutoring sessions (especially those you’ve paid for), request that your tutor write down all your mistakes and then provide you a written report afterwards. Ideally, they will write down the actual mistake you made, followed by the proper pronunciation, word, structure, etc.

I used to do this for some of my private students in Taiwan and many found this style of correction to be far more valuable than their formal (and far more expensive) classes.
Build Your Toolbox

“Man is a tool-using animal. Without tools he is nothing, with tools he is all.
—Thomas Carlyle
The ability to “choose your own adventure” represents one of the greatest advantages of self-guided immersion over traditional classroom-based learning, where you are usually stuck with whatever materials and topics your teacher or school chooses. Since you are learning Japanese on your own terms, you have no excuse but to pick excellent materials and resources that fit your unique interests, professional needs, learning style, and S.M.A.R.T. goals.

“Study hard what interests you the most in the most undisciplined, irreverent and original manner possible.”
— Richard P. Feynman
Choose Ideal Materials

"Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives; choice, not chance, determines your destiny.” —Aristotle

Choose Your Own Adventure

There is no better way to improve both enjoyment and efficacy than choosing your own materials. The ability to “choose your own adventure” so to speak represents one of the greatest advantages of self-guided immersion over traditional classroom-based learning, where you are usually stuck with whatever materials and topics your teacher or school chooses.

That's why I have dedicated so much of this guide to specific (but diverse) resource recommendations that enable you to choose something that best fits your personal interests and professional needs, including:

★ Phrasebooks
★ Grammar guides
★ Dictionaries
★ Podcasts
★ Online radio
★ Audiobooks
★ Music
★ Online video sites
★ Television shows
★ Anime
★ Movies
★ Video games
★ Manga
★ Newspapers
★ News sites
★ Magazines
★ eBooks
★ Literature
Choose Digital Materials When Possible

I’ll be honest: I have an almost fetish-level attraction to good old-fashioned paper books. Whether it’s the feel of turning the pages, the weight of the book in my hands, or the smell of dusty old paper, there’s just something about the tactile nature of print books that their digital counterparts can never match. When it comes to learning a second language, however, especially one like Japanese or Chinese that uses ideophonetic characters with multiple readings and meanings, digital materials make our lives much, much easier:

Digital Materials are Faster

When I started learning Japanese in college, eBooks were still on the fringe and I did most of my reading practice in print books. Having to look up unknown words and kanji in a separate dictionary meant that even a single page could take over an hour, especially when going through materials that were over my head.

Worse yet, back then there was no easy way to enter kanji using handwriting input like you can now on your smartphone screen or laptop trackpad. Nope, if you encountered a kanji and didn’t know how it’s pronounced, the only way to look it up was by stroke count or radical, a glacier-pace affair that I don’t miss in the slightest.

Today’s Japanese learner, on the other hand, can look up and save words extremely quickly using online popup dictionaries and built-in dictionaries in the Kindle and iBooks apps.

Digital Materials are More Portable

It’s a lot easier to carry around “bits” instead of “atoms”. Most smartphones and tablets can store more reading and listening content than you could get through in a lifetime. Instead of killing your back and wasting valuable space in your travel bag, you can just carry all your Japanese content in digital format instead.

Digital Materials are Often Cheaper

Due to their lower production and distribution costs, the retail price of digital materials tends to be much lower than their paper equivalents. Best of all, you can find a lot of digital content for free online, including digitized versions of books in the public domain, books published with a Creative Commons license, etc.
Choose the Shortest Materials Possible

Shorter Materials are Less Intimidating

Long materials can be daunting, and we are more likely to put off difficult tasks. The longer we postpone, the less likely we are to ever begin in the first place. Think about it: given the option between reading a short blog article or a long novel, which would you choose? There’s certainly nothing wrong with reading the novel, and I hope you do finish a Japanese text cover to cover some day, but it’s better to start small than never at all. Instead of letting the fear of committing to massive undertakings hold you back, just choose something small and manageable to build momentum.

Shorter Materials Lead to Small Wins

“Once a small win has been accomplished, forces are set in motion that favor another small win. Small wins fuel transformative changes by leveraging tiny advantages into patterns that convince people that bigger achievements are within reach.” —Karl E. Weick

Though you might not receive any gold stars for finishing a Japanese podcast or blog post, doing so will at least provide a small sense of achievement that can motivate you to try bigger and better things like finishing an entire book.

Shorter Materials are Better Suited for Repetition

If you have children or have ever spent a great deal of time around them, you know that they love watching the same cartoon episode or rereading the same book again, and again, and again. This taste for repetition is likely an evolutionary adaptation to speed up first language acquisition. While we adults may not enjoy repetition as much, we still benefit from its power. The shorter a material is, the easier (and less painful) it will be to repeat it.
Choose Audio Materials Whenever Possible

Many language learners fall into the trap of spending too much time reading and not enough time listening. As reading becomes easier, one spends more and more time with their nose in a book, furthering the language skill imbalance and making person to person interaction ever more uncomfortable. Don’t let yourself fall into this trap! Ensure that you spend just as much time listening—if not more—than reading from day one.

Listen to Podcasts

As I will discuss more shortly, podcasts are one of the best tools for language learning as they tend to be free, cover a wide range of topics, and often include transcripts and show notes.

➔ See the “Japanese Podcasts” section.

Listen to the News

Sites like NHK Web News Easy provide audio and video companions to each article so you can listen first and then read to check your comprehension and look up new words.

➔ Check out NHK Web News Easy.

Choose Audiobooks or Texts with Audio Companions

If you really enjoy reading, try finding the audio version of books you want to read, or get books that include an audio companion CD (such as those in the “Japanese Literature Compilations” section).

➔ See the “Japanese Audiobooks” section.
➔ See the “Japanese Literature Compilations” section.

Use RhinoSpike to Create Audio Versions of Text-Only Content

Creating audio versions of text-only content you love is another great way to improve your Japanese listening skills. You can have a tutor record material for you, or use one of my favorite crowdsourcing tools, RhinoSpike:

★ Submit Your Text. Simply upload some text content that you want a native Japanese speaker to record.

★ Record for Submissions in Your Native Language. To both help the community and push your submission ahead in line, answer a request for recordings in your native language.

★ Download the Finished Audio File. When a native speaker has finished recording your text submission, just download it to your computer.

➔ Visit RhinoSpike.com: “Foreign Language Audio on Demand”.

Submit Your Text. Record for Submissions in Your Native Language. Download the Finished Audio File.
Choose a Phrasebook

**Lonely Planet Japanese Phrasebook**

Lonely Planet’s excellent phrasebooks are not just for travelers. They happen to be one of the best sources of high-frequency, high-yield vocabulary and grammar patterns available. And best of all, Lonely Planet prints each phrase in English, *roumaji*, and *kanji*, unlike most phrasebooks that only include English and *roumaji*. Including the characters is not just good for exposure; it also enables you to use the “speak first, then point” method. If your pronunciation fails to get your meaning across, you can just point to the phrase in the book. Eyes often win out over ears...

➔ *Lonely Planet Japanese Phrasebook (with audio CD).*

➔ *Lonely Planet Japanese Phrasebook (book only).*

**The Ultimate Japanese Phrasebook**

I find most phrasebooks equally awful, with their stilted or overly simplified vocabulary choices, notoriously bad English pronunciation guides, and a complete lack of Japanese script (which they say is to make it easier for non-native speakers, but in fact, just makes it easier for them to create and publish the books). *The Ultimate Japanese Phrasebook*, however, has none of these common weaknesses:

★ It includes 1,800 authentic, everyday sentences.

★ It is written in all three scripts: *kanji*, *furigana* and *roumaji*, unlike most phrasebooks that use only *roumaji*.

★ It includes a well-produced MP3 CD with professional voice actors.

➔ *The Ultimate Japanese Phrasebook (with audio CD).*

**A Handbook of Common Japanese Phrases**

Like the above phrasebook, *A Handbook of Common Japanese Phrases* includes heaps of useful expressions presented in both Japanese script and *roumaji*. The book also includes lots of additional cultural commentary and tips.

➔ *A Handbook of Common Japanese Phrases*
Japanese Podcasts

Pod What?

Despite the myriad advantages podcasts offer language learners, I am often surprised how many people are still unfamiliar with this modern form of content creation and distribution. In a nutshell, podcasts are free audio or video programs distributed via RSS or XLM feeds, meaning that new content automatically shows up in your feed reader or “podcatcher” (the most common of which is iTunes). The word “podcasting” is a portmanteau that combines the pod from “iPod” with the casting from “broadcasting”, but it is important to note that podcasts are not specific to Apple devices and can be enjoyed on any smartphone, media player, or computer. Many apps (e.g. Stitcher) even allow you to stream shows so you don’t have to fill up your device with files.

➔ Check out “Podcasting in Plain English” by Common Craft.

Why Podcasts are Perfect for Language Learning

Podcasts offer many advantages over other material types:

- **Podcasts Are Almost Always Free**
  While some podcasts offer premium content and tools on their companion sites, the podcasts themselves (which is really all we need for our purposes) are usually free.

- **Podcasts Are Usually Short**
  Podcasts tend to be quite short (5 to 20 minutes), making them easier to repeat again and again.

- **Podcasts Are Diverse**
  Podcast programs range from professionally created shows produced by major studios to do-it-yourself programs recorded in someone’s bedroom. This leads to a wide, varied pool of topics, with something sure to meet your specific interests.

- **Podcasts Are Convenient**
  Based on your podcatcher’s settings, the latest episodes of your favorite podcasts can be automatically downloaded as soon as they become available.
Section 4

Japanese Radio

While perhaps not as ideal for language learning as other sources of listening input (since you can’t pause, go back, or read transcripts), Japanese radio is still worth adding to your arsenal since it provides a good kick-back listening experience that doesn’t require as much active jockeying as podcasts. Radio programs also tend to be more closely tied to events of the day.

➔ Check out Wikipedia’s expansive list of Japanese radio stations.

TuneIn

While many Japanese radio stations have their own websites, I find it much easier to just access everything in one place using TuneIn’s excellent site or mobile apps.

➔ Browse Japanese radio stations on TuneIn by city or station.

➔ Download the TuneIn app for iOS, Android, or Windows Phone (free).

Stitcher

To find Japanese programs on Stitcher, you can either just search for “Japanese” or browse by topic:

★ Click “Browse Shows” in the left sidebar and then “International”

★ Scroll down and choose one of the Japanese options, e.g. ニュースと政治 (“News & Politics”), 文化 (“Culture”), or 喜劇 (“Comedy”).

➔ Set up a free Stitcher account.

➔ Download the Stitcher app for iOS or Android (free).

Simulradio

Simulradio lacks the polish and mobile apps offered by TuneIn and Stitcher, but the site’s sheer number of Japanese radio station feeds makes it worth a look.

➔ Visit the Simulradio site.
If you are completely new to Japanese or have been studying for a while but still struggle to produce accurate pronunciation or speak on the fly, I highly recommend getting your hands on one of the audio courses from Michel Thomas or Pimsleur. They can be a bit pricey, so check your local library first.

Both programs do an excellent job of presenting essential words, phrases, and structures in an intuitive, building-block method, all the while getting you to speak aloud so you can activate what you learn, get used to hearing and producing the sounds of the language, and build stronger procedural memories.

The Michel Thomas Method

With Michel Thomas’ passing on January 8, 2005, the world lost one of the best language learners and teachers to ever live. And live he did. Born to wealthy Jewish factory owners in Poland, Michel (born Moniek Kroskof) was sent to live in Germany when growing antisemitism began to limit his opportunities at home. He later studied in France and Austria, but as history shows, none of these countries were safe from the spread of Nazism. Michel joined the French Resistance (at which time he changed his name), but was later caught and interned by the Nazis.

After surviving not just one, but multiple Nazi concentration camps, he went on to work with the U.S. Army Counter Intelligence Corps to fight his former captors, a duty for which he was awarded the Silver Star in 2004. Just as the awful reality of internment led Viktor Frankl to uncover the true human power, so too it did for Michel, who states:

“I concentrated so hard that I stopped feeling pain... I contemplated the untapped reserves of the human mind. The great hidden depths of the brain. I learned from it.”

After World War II, Michel moved to Los Angeles where he began a language school, continuing to refine his language teaching approach. Given his location and growing reputation for fast and
I used to think that audiobooks were only for the lazy or illiterate, but I quickly changed my tune once I realized how powerful they can be in foreign language learning. Just like with podcasts, you can listen while commuting, doing housework, shopping for groceries, etc.

And best of all, you can back up your listening by later reading (or pre-reading) the print or ebook equivalent.

Japanese Audiobook Directories

From novels to children’s books, the following directories have audiobooks to fit every taste:

Perapera’s Definitive List of Japanese Language Audiobooks

In this list, Francis Campbell of Perapera.org pulls together a host of Japanese language audiobooks, many of which are free!

➔ Visit Perapera.org’s list of Japanese audiobooks.

RevTK Audiobook Wiki

This extensive list of audiobooks was culled from suggestions on the Reviewing the Kanji forums. All of the suggested audiobooks include a Japanese transcript and English translation.

➔ Visit the RevTK Audiobook Wiki.

List of Free Audiobooks with Transcripts

Like the RevTK list above, this user generated list from the “How to Learn Any Language” forum includes suggested Japanese audiobooks that also include transcripts.

➔ Visit the How To Learn Any Language forum.

Voice Bouquet

Literally meaning “Voice Bouquet”, koe no hanataba (声の花束・こえのはなたば) provides oodles and oodles of free Japanese audiobooks.

➔ Browse free audiobooks on Voice Bouquet.
The Chinese characters in the word for music, *ongaku* (音楽・おんがく), literally mean “sound” and “fun”, which says a lot about the power of music in language learning. Not only is it inherently enjoyable, but the rhythm of music actually improves retention. Try it yourself: just add a simply melody to any phrase or sentence you’re struggling to remember, and boom, you will be able to recall it much more easily. Moreover, learning the lyrics of Japanese music helps you get reading and listening input at the same time.

**Where to Stream Japanese Music**

It wasn’t too long ago that you had two options for listening to music you love: buy a CD or hope to hear something good on the radio. With the plethora of new streaming sites, you can now hear exactly the genres and artists you love anywhere, anytime, all for free!

**TuneIn**

This amazing site and app allows you to listen to a wide range of Japanese music genres for free.

- Browse Japanese music genres on TuneIn.
- Browse Japanese radio stations by city or name.
- Download the TuneIn app (iOS & Android, free).

**Japanese Radio Stations Online**

Provided by Multilingualbooks.com, this list includes dozens of Japanese radio stations you can stream for free online.

- Browse online Japanese radio stations.
We have been conditioned by well-intentioned mothers to believe that television will “destroy our brains”. This might well be true if one spends their time watching “reality” TV shows that don’t actually reflect reality, the sensationalist 24-hour news cycle, and tasteless drivel that neither entertains nor educates. But if you watch television in Japanese, this otherwise time and brain-waisting activity can become a constructive form of language learning that even mommy should be able to get behind.

### Where to Stream Japanese Video

**YouTube Japan**

Ah yes, everyone’s favorite source for stupid pet tricks, even stupider *human* tricks, and pirated TV (at least until the content owners force them to be removed...). So long as you make sure to watch Japanese content, you shouldn’t feel too guilty about YouTubing instead of working.

- [Browse videos on YouTube Japan.](#)
- [Download the YouTube app for iOS.](#)
- [Download the YouTube app for Android.](#)

If you are having a hard time following what’s happening in a particular video, try YouTube’s nifty “Auto-Captioning” tool, which leverages voice-to-text transcription technology to add subtitles to videos that otherwise lack them. It’s far from perfect, but it can be a big help establishing context. To use the tool:

- ★ Click the “CC” icon below the video.
- ★ Click “Transcribe Audio”.
- ★ Click “CC” again “Turn Caption Off” to disable the feature.
- [Learn more about Auto-Captions.](#)
Knowing more than a few friends who have wasted much of their teenage and adult lives playing video games, I am a little reluctant to recommend them as a Japanese language learning tool. But I must admit that “TV Games” (what they call video games in Japanese) can be an especially powerful tool for independent language learning:

★ They are addictive, meaning you don’t need the motivation and discipline required for many other forms of input.

★ They are designed around human psychology, providing just the right mix of challenge and reward to keep you going.

Many console games (especially of the RPG variety) incorporate a good mixture of listening and reading input.

Like all things in life, the key is moderation and balance. Remember that you are using the game to enable you to better communicate with real, living, homo sapiens out in the real, physical world.

This now concludes the public service announcement.

Where to Buy Japanese Video Games

Amazon Video Game Store

Amazon is the first place I suggest looking for games and game consoles as they often offer free shipping and have a wider selection (and far better pricing) than most online retailers.

➔ Browse the Amazon Video Game Store.

Amazon Japan

With regard to buying console games themselves, your best bet is using the Japanese Amazon store (amazon.co.jp) as there are few Japanese import games to be found in the U.S., U.K., and Canadian stores. Worry not, you can ship to addresses worldwide and you don’t need to have a Japanese credit card or
Japanese Comic Books

I was late to the *manga* (漫画・まんが) party, not discovering this wonderfully addictive art form until well into my Japanese journey. I hope you don’t make the same mistake: *manga* is one of the best ways to improve your Japanese reading skills, especially in the awkward intermediate phase when novels are bit too daunting but learner specific materials are too easy.

Why Manga?

Here are a few of the reasons manga are so well suited for Japanese learners:

**Manga Present More Colloquial Language**

Perhaps the greatest advantage of Japanese comic books is that they tend to use less formal language than textbooks, newspapers, etc., offering you a unique chance to see Japanese words that you would normally only hear.

**Manga Provide a Vivid Visual Context**

Not only are the illustrations fun to look at in their own right, but they also help provide a context for the words you are reading. The clearer the context, the easier it is to figure out what’s going on, make new connections, and commit Japanese words and phrases to memory.

**Many Manga Include Furigana**

Most manga include little *hiragana* (平仮名・ひらがな) reading guides called *furigana* (振り仮名・ふりがな) that will not only help you learn the various readings of *kanji*, but also make it much faster to look up new words and *kanji* in a dictionary. You
Japanese Newspapers

For those wanting to get their news fix in Japanese, here are some recommended "newspapers", news sites, and news apps.

Recommended News Sites & Apps

Online Japanese newspapers and sites are not only free, but they also allow you to look up and save words far more quickly than their paper counterparts.

**NHK News Web EASY**

Called *yasashii nihongo-no nyuusu* (やさしい日本語のニュース・やさしいにほんごのにゅうす) in Japanese, the “NHK News Web EASY” site was created to provide younger Japanese readers with a more approachable reading experience than traditional news. With the site’s extensive use of *furigana* (振り仮名・ふりがな) readings, simplified vocabulary, and pop-up definitions for technical terms, News Web EASY is perfect for non-native speakers, too.

➔ Read articles on NHK News Web EASY.

**Rocket News 24**

The peeps over at *Rocket News* (ロケットニュース・ろけっとにゅうす) have created a mobile-friendly version of their site that works well on both iOS and Android devices. While there are many mainstream Japanese news outlets to choose from, I quite like Rocket News’ more playful take on the daily news.

➔ Read articles on Rocket News 24.

**Google News Japan**

In addition to international news, business news, technology news, and political news, Google News Japan also shows news about your local area (automatically detected using your computer’s IP address) in Japanese!

➔ Read articles on Google News Japan.
➔ Download the Google News iOS app.
Finding content that fits your specific interests is an essential part of self-guided immersion, and magazines afford a level of niche granularity not afforded in many other forms of print media. Best of all, many of the magazines below offer free content online.

Japanese Learner Magazines

The following few magazines were written specifically for Japanese learners, meaning that you will find useful features like liberal use of furigana, English translations, and even CD-ROMs with audio versions of the articles in MP3 format.

Hir@gana Times

This bilingual magazine presents every article in both Japanese and English, with furigana reading guides for every kanji.

➔ Learn more about The Hiragana Times.

Nipponia

Though it doesn’t include English translations like the Hir@gana Times (which I actually think is a good thing), Nipponia (にっぽにあ) does include furigana reading guides for kanji.

➔ Learn more about Nipponia.

The Japan Times ST

Although intended for native speakers of Japanese learning English, the Shukan ST (週刊ST・しゅうかんえすでぃ) can also be of great benefit to English speakers learning Japanese. I have found such “reverse immersion” to be an interesting way to simultaneously learn Japanese and improve my ability to teach English to Japanese speakers.

➔ Learn more about The Japan Times ST.
Japan is one of the most literate societies on the planet, with a literacy rate of 99% and nearly 80,000 new titles published each year, so you will have no shortage of written material to dig your teeth into. Although books and literature will probably become most enjoyable once you reach an upper-intermediate to advanced level, you can start at any level, especially if you use eBooks (since you can quickly look up unknown words), children’s books (with their basic vocabulary and simple story lines), and visual novels (with their vivid visual contexts).

Recommended eBook Apps

The following apps allow you download eBooks on the fly and take them with you wherever you go.

Kindle Application

Don’t have a Kindle? No problem! Amazon’s free Kindle apps allow you to read Kindle eBooks on nearly every operating system and device. Best of all, highlights and bookmarks you make are miraculously synced between all your devices, and they even include suggested highlights based on what text is most highlighted by other users.

➔ Download the Kindle app for iOS, Android, Mac, PC, and more.
➔ Browse Japanese eBooks in Amazon Japan’s “Kindle本” section.

iBooks

While I love the cross-platform nature of the Kindle App, I must concede that the iBooks slick user interface takes the cake. In addition to books you buy from the iBooks Store, you can also add PDFs to your bookshelf via iTunes on your computer or right on your iOS device.

➔ Download the iBooks app for iOS.
➔ Browse Japanese books in iTunes Japan.
“I’m still pretty sure that Japanese is not vague. Or at least, it’s not as vague as it used to be. Probably.”

—Jay Rubin
“Undeniably, Japanese is different from English. The language is different, the people are different, the society is different, and all of these are enormously interesting precisely for that reason. The Japanese do so many things ‘backwards’ from our point of view. A Japanese sentence, with its verb coming at the end, is not only backwards but upside-down. One of the most satisfying experiences a human being can have is to train his or her mind actually to think in a foreign mode—the more nearly upside-down and backwards the better. But we must never let its apparent strangeness blind us to the simple fact that Japanese is just another language. And we can increase the precision with which we understand that language if we do away with some of the mystical nonsense that continues to cling to it even in the age of the computer and the electric nose-hair trimmer.”

—Dr. Jay Rubin
Japanese Overview

Remember: Master Japanese is not a textbook. The real learning happens out there in the real world. The Japanese 101 section is provided only as a preview of the ins and outs of the Japanese language, helping to whet your linguistic appetite and prime your brain for what it will hear, say, read, and write as you go through the input and output activities I suggest in the guide. Don’t worry too much about memorizing what you see here; it takes lots of exposure before the “rules” will make much sense.

Japanese Speakers Around the World

With 127 million native speakers, Japanese is the 9th most widely spoken language in the world. Although 99% of first-language Japanese speakers live in Japan, people of Japanese descent, known as nikkeijin (日系人・にkkeiじん), can be found across the globe. Moreover, more than a million Japanese citizens are currently living abroad according to Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Note that first generation nikkeijin are referred to as issei (一世・いっせい), while second, third, and fourth generations are known as nisei (二世・にせい), sansei (三世・さんせい), and yonsei (四世・よんせい) respectively.

There is also the linguistic side effect of Japanese’s wartime colonialism to consider. As Japan invaded neighboring territories in the build up to World War II, they often banned native languages, forcing locals to learn and use Japanese instead. Many older individuals in these countries can still speak the language, though feelings about their former occupiers vary significantly. Be mindful of historical sensitivities, and don’t assume that just because someone can speak Japanese, means that they feel comfortable doing so. Interestingly, I once sat next to an elderly Taiwanese gentleman on a bus, and we ended up using Japanese as a lingua franca since he didn’t speak Mandarin or English. He actually had a great deal of praise for the Japanese, since they (as opposed to the Chinese Nationalists...
Japanese Orthography

Japanese orthography (a fancy word for “correct writing”) is at once complex and elegant, beautiful and busy.

But if you can break through the psychological barriers Japanese writing presents, you will see that it is one of the language’s most interesting aspects, and in many ways, the most logical:

“The writing of the kanji is the most completely rational part of the language. Over the centuries, the writing of the kanji has been simplified many times, always with rational principles in mind. Aside from the Korean hangul, there may be no writing system in the world as logically structured as the Sino-Japanese characters are.” —James Heisig

Japanese’s Triumvirate Writing System

The complexity of Japanese writing is largely due to the fact that three different scripts (or technically four since there are two different kinds of kana) are used simultaneously in modern Japanese:

★ Kanji
★ Kana (Hiragana & Katakana)
★ Roumaji

Here is an actual headline from NHK that includes all the possible scripts:

ロシアのシベリアに直径60mの大きな穴が出来た

★ Kanji: The word 直径 (“diameter”), the stem of the adjective 大きな (“big”), and the stem of the verb 出来た.
★ Katakana: The foreign loan words roshia (ロシア, “Russia”) and shiberia (シベリア, “Siberia”).
★ Hiragana: The grammatical particles の, に, and が, as well as the ending of the adjective 大きな and the verb 出来た.
★ Roumaji: The number 60 and the letter m, an abbreviation for “meters”.
Japanese vocabulary can be broken into three main groups:

- ★ Foreign loan words
- ★ Words of Chinese origin
- ★ Words of Japanese origin

Foreign Loan Words

Foreign loan words, called gairaigo (外来語・がいらいご), refer to terms and phrases borrowed into Japanese from other languages (excluding the myriad words borrowed from Chinese as they get their own category, which we will look at shortly.)

Gairaigo account for about 10% of modern Japanese, though you can actually get by using them as nearly every word in a sentence if you are so inclined! While most gairaigo supplement an existing native Japanese or Chinese-based term, some words have been borrowed in to fill a linguistic gap created by new technologies, scientific discoveries, social trends, etc.

The vast majority of foreign loan words are relatively recent additions from English, but quite a few terms were also borrowed from Portuguese and Dutch during the 16th and 17th centuries when these nations began trading in earnest with Japan, and later from German and French during the meiji jidai (明治時代・めいじじだい, “Meiji Period”) when Japan brought in thousands of European engineers, designers, doctors, and so on, to help “modernize” the nation.

Foreign loan words are usually written in katakana though some terms (especially those borrowed into the language hundreds of years ago) are written in ateji (当て字・あてじ), kanji whose sounds at least somewhat match the original word’s pronunciation. A interesting example of this is the word tabako ("tobacco"), which can actually be written in all three scripts:

- ★ 煙草 in kanji
- ★ たばこ in hiragana
- ★ タバコ in katakana

Today, English-derived words often carry a more modern and fashionable connotation, and are frequently used in marketing campaigns trying to paint their brands as just that. And as is always the case when a culture borrows heaps of foreign words...
There are three main levels of formality in Japanese, collectively referred to as *keigo* (敬語・けいご, “respectful language”). Which level you should use depends on who is talking, whom they are talking to, and whom they are talking about, with a line drawn between one’s “in-group” (friends, family, colleagues, etc.) and one’s “out-group” (customers, bosses, strangers, etc.). Distinctions between in- and out-groups, however, are not always obvious. For example, when talking to your boss, you would use respectful language, but if talking about your head honcho to a customer, you would use humble language.

## Levels of Formality

### Polite Language

The polite level of formality, called *teineigo* (丁寧語・ていねいご) is used for members of both your in-group and out-group. *Teineigo* is marked by verbs ending in *masu* (ます), adjectives followed by *desu* (です), and use of the polite, gender-neutral pronoun *watashi* (私・わたし). *Teineigo* is usually taught to Japanese learners first since it is the most commonly used level of formality.

### Respectful Language

Called *sonkeigo* (尊敬語・そんけいご), this level of formality is used to place others above oneself. As you might expect, it is used frequently in business contexts, such as when talking to or about one’s customers or superiors. Note that you never use *sonkeigo* when referring to oneself or one’s in-group.

### Humble Language

In contrast to respectful language, the *kenjougo* (謙譲語・けんじょうご) level of formality is all about self-deprecation. It’s used when speaking about oneself or in-group to one’s out-group or those of a higher social status.
### Japanese Honorific Verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dictionary</th>
<th>Polite</th>
<th>Respectful</th>
<th>Humble</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>suru (する)</td>
<td>shimasu (します)</td>
<td>nasaru (なさる)</td>
<td>itasu (致す・いたします)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iu (言う・いう)</td>
<td>iimasu (いいます)</td>
<td>ossharu (おっしゃる)</td>
<td>moshi ageru (申し上げる・もうしあげる)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miru (見る・する)</td>
<td>mimasu (みます)</td>
<td>go ran ni naru (ご覧になる・こちらになる)</td>
<td>haiken suru (拝見する・はいけんする)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nomu (飲む・のむ)</td>
<td>nomimasu (のみます)</td>
<td>meshi agaru (召し上がる・めし酸がる)</td>
<td>itadaku (頂く・いただく)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taberu (食べる・たべる)</td>
<td>tabemasu (たべます)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iku (行く・いく)</td>
<td>ikimasu (いきます)</td>
<td>irassharu (いらっしゃる)</td>
<td>ukagau (伺う・うかがう)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuru (来る・くる)</td>
<td>kimasu (きます)</td>
<td>oide ni naru (おいでになる)</td>
<td>mairimasu (参る)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kiku (聞く・きく)</td>
<td>kikimasu (ききます)</td>
<td></td>
<td>ukagau (伺う・うかがう)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tazuneru (尋ねる・たずねる)</td>
<td>tazunemasu (たずねます)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N/A
Japanese verbs are “highly agglutinative”, meaning they take
different suffixes to change their meaning and grammatical function.

Function of Japanese Verb Endings

Expressing Tense Changes
Unlike English, which usually changes the entire verb form to express tense (e.g. eat becomes ate), Japanese simply tacks on a past-tense ending to show when something happened.

Expressing Politeness
Japanese adds the semi-formal ending masu (ます) onto verb stems in polite situations. When more formality is required, special verb suffixes or unique honorific forms are used.

Creating Participles
Verbs are turned into their participle (a.k.a. gerund) form by adding either te (て) or de (で) depending on the verb type.

Creating Negative Endings
In English, we make a statement negative through the auxiliary not. Japanese expresses polarity through verb endings instead. The negative ending for dictionary form verbs is nai (ない), nakatta (なかった) for informal past tense verbs, masen (ません) for polite non-past verbs, and masendeshita (ませんでした) for polite past tense verbs.

Expressing What You Want
To express what you want to do in Japanese, you can simply change the end of verbs to tai (たい).

Expressing Volition
Changing the end of verbs to you (よう) or ou (おう) expresses volition or polite suggestions (much like “Shall we...? in English).

Creating Ba Conditionals
Japanese expresses “If..., then...” constructions using two different verb forms, Ba Conditionals and Tara Conditionals. The
There are two types of adjectives in Japanese: “I-Adjectives” like *utsukushii* (美しい・うつくしい, “beautiful”) and “Na-Adjectives” like *kirei-na* (奇麗な・きれいな). Both can precede the nouns they modify or act as predicates, but there are some important grammar differences between the two.

**Adjectives Before Nouns**

Just like in English, adjectives can come right before the nouns they modify in Japanese. For example, we can express “beautiful sunset” in both English and Japanese by placing the adjective for “beautiful” right in front of the noun “sunset”:

- **I-Adjective**: *utsukushii yuuyake* (美しい夕焼け・うつくしいゆうやけ, “beautiful sunset”)
- **Na-Adjective**: *kirei-na yuuyake* (奇麗な夕焼け・きれいなゆうやけ, “beautiful sunset”)

**Adjectives As Predicates**

Both I-Adjectives and Na-Adjectives can act as predicates in Japanese. For informal situations, sentences can end with just the I-Adjective or a Na-Adjectives followed by *da* (だ):

- **I-Adjectives**: *hontou-ni atsui* (本当に暑い・ほんとうにあつい, “[It’s] really hot.”)
- **Na-Adjectives**: *hontou-ni kirei da* (本当に奇麗だ・ほんとうにきれいだ, “[She’s] really pretty.”)

For formal contexts, both types are followed by *desu* (です):

- **I-Adjectives**: *hontou-ni atsui desu* (本当に暑いです・ほんとうにあついです)
- **Na-Adjectives**: *hontou-ni kirei desu* (本当に奇麗です・ほんとうにきれいです)

**Adjectives at the End of a Clause**

Two of the most common places you’ll find clause-final adjectives are before *to omou* (と思う・とおもう, “to think that...”) and *to iu* (という・とい, “to say...”). Note how a *da* (だ) is required between the Na-Adjective and *to* (と), but not so for I-Adjectives:

- **I-Adjective**: *takai to omou* (高いと思う・たかいとおもう, “I think [it’s] expensive”) vs. *kirei da to omou* (奇麗だと思う・きれいだとおもう, “I think [it’s] beautiful”)
Japanese Adverbs

If you recall from your junior high school English teacher, adverbs “modify or qualify an adjective, verb, or another adverb”. The same holds true for Japanese adverbs, the difference being that the Japanese variety usually come after the topic or right before (but never after) the verb. They can also come at the very beginning of the sentence, but this can sometimes sound a little awkward.

There are four main types of adverbs you will encounter in Japanese, which I will cover in detail in the coming sections:

★ Adverbs Created from I-Adjectives
★ Adverbs Created from Sino-Japanese Nouns
★ Time Adverbs
★ Sound Symbolic Adverbs

Adverbs Created from I-Adjectives

The conjunctive form of an I-Adjective can act as an adverb. If you recall from the Japanese Adjectives section, the conjunctive is created by replacing the final い (i) with く (ku). Such ku-adverbs are placed directly in front of the adjectives or verbs they modify.

★ hayai (速い・はやい, “quick”) → hayaku (はやく, “quickly”)
★ osoi (遅い・おそい, “slow”) → osoku (おそく, “slowly”)

Note that many younger Japanese folks use the word sugoi (凄い・すごい) these days as an adverb without changing it to sugoku (凄く・すごく) as traditional grammar rules would require. As a descriptive linguist, I see nothing wrong with this. But if you want to impress your Japanese teacher or host mother, make sure to use the second sentence instead of the first:

★ kyou wa sugoi atsui (今日は凄い暑い・きょうはすごいあつい, “[It’s] really hot today”)
★ kyou wa sugoku atsui (今日は凄く暑い・きょうはすごくあつい, “[It’s] really hot today”)
Japanese Pronouns

Japanese pronouns, called *daimeishi* (代名詞・だいめいし) can be grouped as follows:

★ *Person.* Japanese has first person, second person, and third person pronouns, though there is no direct translation for the 3rd person “it” found in English.

★ *Number.* Japanese has both singular and plural pronouns, the latter of which is created by adding suffixes to singular pronouns.

★ *Gender.* Unlike English, which only differentiates gender in the 3rd person (i.e. “he” versus “she”), Japanese has a number of gender specific pronouns.

★ *Formality.* Depending on the context, you can use either informal or formal pronouns in Japanese.

Unlike most European languages, you do not need to conjugate Japanese verbs to match the subject pronoun. Notice below that the verb form is the same for all subjects in Japanese but that we add an ‘s’ on the end of third-person singular verbs in English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Person</th>
<th>watashi-wa kouhi-wo nomu</th>
<th>(私はコーヒーを飲む·わたしはこうひをのむ)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>“I drink coffee.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>watashitachi-wa kouhi-wo nomu</td>
<td>(私たちはコーヒーを飲む·わたしたちはこうひをのむ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We drink coffee.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Person</td>
<td>anata-wa kouhi-wo nomu</td>
<td>(あなたはコーヒーを飲む·あなたはこうひをのむ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>“You drink coffee.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>anatatachi-wa kouhi-wo nomu</td>
<td>(あなたたちはコーヒーを飲む·あなたたちはこうひをのむ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Y’all drink coffee.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Person</td>
<td>kare-wa kouhi-wo nomu</td>
<td>(彼はコーヒーを飲む·かれはこうひをのむ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>“He drinks coffee.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>karera-wa kouhi-wo nomu</td>
<td>(彼らはコーヒーを飲む·かれらはこうひをのむ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“They drink coffee.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Japanese Proper Nouns

This section presents some of the most common Japanese proper nouns, including family names, given names, place names, and brand names.

With their irregular readings and lack of capitalization, Japanese proper nouns can easily throw non-native speakers for a loop.

Fortunately, the 80-20 rule can be used to shave down the list of total proper names to only the most common names you will encounter (as I have done for you below). Learn these names first, and then worry about less frequent names later.

Japanese Family & Given Names

100 Most Common Japanese Family Names

It is estimated that there are over 100,000 Japanese family names, but like in English, the same common names account for the vast majority of Japanese people.

Family names are called myouji (苗字・名字・みょうじ), uji (氏・うじ), or sei (姓・せい) in Japanese, and usually consist of two Chinese characters, though you will encounter some one or three-character names as well. As you are probably already aware, family names come first in Japanese (hence why I haven’t been calling them “last names”), followed by given names.

Similar to many English last names, Japanese family names tend to relate to place names or geographical markers associated with where people lived. For example, the name TANAKA (田中・たなか) literally means “in the rice field”, while the name TAKAHASHI (高橋・たかはし) literally means “high bridge”.

Note that some distinct Japanese names are romanized the exact same way, especially minimal pairs that have the same pronunciation except for a difference in vowel length. For example, the romanization “Ono” could apply to oono (大野・おのおの) or ono (小野・おの).
Called *joshi* (助詞・じょし) in Japanese, grammatical particles do a lot of heavy lifting despite their small size. Many Japanese particles express the same meanings as English prepositions such as “at”, “in”, “on”, “from”, “to”, and “by”. Note that a single English preposition can have multiple Japanese counterparts, such as the directional “to” which can be expressed by *ni* (に), *e* (へ), and *made* (まで). Likewise, a single Japanese post-position may have multiple English equivalents, such as the temporal *ni* (に), which is equivalent to “in”, “on” and “at” depending on whether it follows a year, month, day, or time of day.

I have arranged the most common Japanese grammatical particles below in alphabetical order.

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**Bakari (ばかり)**

The focus particle *bakari* (ばかり) is used as follows:

**Indicating Recent Actions**

When it follows verbs in their past-tense form, the particle *bakari* (ばかり) expresses the meaning of “just”.

★ *tabeta bakari desu* (食べたばかりです・たべたばかりです, “I just ate.”)

★ *ima tsuita bakari da* (今着いたばかりだ・いまついたばかりだ, “I just arrived.”)

**Indicating Excessive Actions**

When following nouns or verbs in their te-form, the particle *bakari* (ばかり) means “only” or “all”.

★ *biru bakari nomu-no karada-ni yokunai* (ビールばかり飲むの体に良くない・びいるばかりのむのからだによくな, “Drinking only beer isn’t good for your health.”)

★ *kare-wa ichi-nichi-juu nete bakari iru* (彼は一日中寝てばかりいる・かれはいちにちじゅうねてばかりいる, “All he does is sleep all day.”)
In this section, we will cover: how to count from zero to 900 trillion (yes, you read that correctly), and how to count people, items, and objects using what are called "counters" or "measure words".

The bad news is that there are numerous pronunciation exceptions when it comes to numbers and counter words in Japanese. The good news is that such exceptions are fairly predictable. I have marked all special pronunciations in orange to help draw your attention to them.

Japanese Numbers

Counting 0 to 10

Japanese numbers take their pronunciation from 2 sources:

Borrowed Pronunciations

When the Japanese began importing Chinese characters (including the kanji for numbers), they also borrowed the pronunciations that went with them. Many hundreds of years later, a secondary reading for zero was borrowed from English.

★ 0: rei (れい) or zero (ゼロ・ぜろ)
★ 1: ichi (いち)
★ 2: ni (に)
★ 3: san (さん)
★ 4: yon (よん) or shi (四・し)
★ 5: go (ご)
★ 6: roku (ろく)
★ 7: nana (なな) or shichi (七・しち)
★ 8: hachi (はち)
★ 9: kyu (きゅう)
★ 10: jyu (じゅう)
Japanese indicates time using the following counter words:

- **nen** (年・ねん, “year”)
- **gatsu** (月・がつ, “month”)
- **nichi** (日・にち, “day”)
- **ji** (時・じ, “hour”)
- **fun** (分・ふん, “minute”)
- **byou** (秒・びょう, “second”)

Note that when telling the date in Japanese, you always go from “big” to “small”: year → month → day → time.

---

**Western vs Japanese Calendar**

There are two systems used in Japan to denote the year, one borrowed from the West and one of native Japanese origin.

**Western Calendar**

Called seireki (西暦・せいれき), the “Western” or “Common Era” calendar is used often in modern Japan. Note that the year is always pronounced as a four-digit number in Japanese:


As you can see above, 4 is pronounced yo (よ) not yon (よん) when used with nen (年・ねん).

**Japanese Era Name**

Japan’s native calendar system is called the nengou (年号・ねんごう). It is based on the reign of Japanese emperors, and the era names they are associated with. Recent eras include:

- **meiji-jidai** (明治時代・めいじじだい, “The Meiji Era”), which spanned from 1868 to 1912.
- **taishou jidai** (大正時代・たいしょうじだい, “The Taishou Era”), which spanned from 1912 to 1926.
Thank You!

I hope you have enjoyed reading Master Japanese as much as I enjoyed writing it. I aim to continually improve this guide going forward, and would greatly appreciate your feedback on what you liked and what could be better. And more importantly, please get in touch to let me know how your Japanese journey is going. I am here to help!

➔ john@languagemastery.com

Sincerely,

John Fotheringham