

LESSON NOTES

How to Write in Japanese: Hiragana and Katakana #11 The Katakana Vowels

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VOCABULARY

| Kanji | Kana | Romaji | English | Class |
|---------|---------|-----------|-----------------|-------|
| エアコン | エアコン | eakon | air conditioner | noun |
| ウィキペディア | ウィキペディア | Wikipedia | Wikipedia | |
| オーケー | オーケー | ōkē | okay | |
| エアメール | エアメール | eamēru | airmail | noun |
| ウェ이터 | ウェ이터 | weitā | waiter | noun |

SAMPLE SENTENCES

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| エアコンは夏の必需品です。 <i>Eakon wa natsu no hitsujuhin desu.</i> An air conditioner is a must during summer. | お客さんから、ウェ이터に苦情が出てしまった。 <i>O-kyaku-san kara, weitā ni kujō ga dete shimatta.</i> The customer complained about the waiter. |
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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is Mastering the Katakana Vowels

In this lesson, you'll learn about *katakana*, how it is different from *hiragana*, and the five *katakana* vowels.

Katakana is the exact equivalent of *hiragana* when it comes to pronunciation. The main difference is their appearance and when they are used.

Katakana characters tend to look more angular. There is also almost nothing in common between how the *katakana* character looks compared to its *hiragana* counterpart, except for a few characters.

So why is it that we need to learn 2 basic writing systems when they both sound exactly the same?

The main use of *katakana* is to differentiate and spell out foreign words using the Japanese syllabary. This makes it easier for Japanese people to know how they are approximately pronounced.

Most country names, foreign names, and all loan words from the modern era are written down in *katakana*.

Katakana is also used to write down onomatopoeia sounds like how you would see sound

effects written in Japanese manga!

It is also used to write certain technical or scientific words.

Finally, *katakana* is also used for emphasis just like how English uses italics.

ア (a)

Katakana ア is written in 2 strokes.

The first stroke is a horizontal stroke which starts from the left and turns sharply to make a short curve.

The second stroke starts a bit to the top of where the first stroke ends. It goes down, almost touching the end of the first stroke, continues down, and curves to the left.

イ (i)

Katakana イ is written in 2 strokes.

The first stroke is a curved diagonal line starting from this point down to the left end. The second stroke starts from the middle of the first stroke and goes straight down.

ウ (u)

Katakana ウ looks an angular version of the *hiragana* う.

Here's a special use of the dakuten unique to *katakana*. It is placed with the character ウ to signify the letter V, ヴ.

However, there is no "v" sound in Japanese so most people would pronounce this as a "b" sound.

Katakana ウ is written in 3 strokes. Instead of a short slanted stroke, start with a short vertical stroke. Next, draw another short vertical stroke to the left of the first stroke. For the final stroke, start from where the second stroke started, and draw a long horizontal line touching the end of the first stroke. When you reach the rightmost part, turn sharply down and make a curve.

エ (e)

Katakana エ is written in 3 strokes.

First draw a horizontal line on the top. Then draw the second stroke from the middle of the first stroke down to the bottom. Finally, draw another horizontal line at the bottom touching the end of the second stroke at the center as well. Make sure that the third stroke is longer than the first stroke to have a good balance.

オ (o)

Katakana オ is written in 3 strokes. The first stroke is a long horizontal stroke going from left to right. The second stroke is a vertical line that cuts through the first stroke 1/3 from the right. It ends with a hane.

The third stroke starts from where the first and second stroke intersect. It's a slightly curved diagonal line going outward. Make sure the third stroke doesn't go lower than the second stroke.

Long vowels (ー)

Unlike *hiragana* where long vowel sounds are indicated using another vowel character, *katakana* writing makes use of the 伸ばし棒 (ー.)

Literally 伸ばし棒 means "stretching bar." So when you see it, just remember that you have to stretch the vowel of the character that comes before it.

Katakana Digraphs using small vowels

In order to accommodate more sounds available from foreign words, *katakana* uses the small versions of the vowel characters to make digraphs outside of those used in Japanese.

For example, since Japanese doesn't have a character for a "wi" or "we" sound, the *katakana* ウ paired with a small イ or エ is used to denote those sounds: ウィ, ウェ.

Because they are digraphs though, they would still be pronounced for the same duration as all the other syllables.

Here are the digraphs you can form using the *katakana* vowels alone.

イエ, ウィ, ウェ, ウォ, ヴァ, ヴィ, ヴェ, ヴォ.

Since most Japanese people can't distinguish between the "v" and "b" sounds, these last 4 digraphs tend to also be spelled using the "b" characters: バ, ビ, ベ and ボ.