

LESSON NOTES

Ultimate Japanese Pronunciation Guide #8

The Secret to Mastering the Japanese Long Vowel

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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is Long Vowels

In this lesson, you're going to learn the secret to mastering long vowels in Japanese.

You have already learned the short vowels:

あ、い、う、え、お

Long vowels are pronounced for twice as long as short vowels, like...

ああ、いい、うう、ええ、おお、

The meaning of a word can change depending on whether the vowel is long or short.

This is a really important part of Japanese pronunciation!

Let's take a look at each of the 5 vowels.

ああ - aa

The short vowel あ is said for one beat, and a long vowel ああ (aa) for two beats.

For example, the Japanese word for "card" contains a long vowel.

カード

When writing in katakana, this mark ("ー") indicates that you need to prolong the vowel of the preceding syllable.

In this case, the vowel "a" in カ should be twice as long to get カード.

The next example is the word for "mark."

マーク

You need to prolong the vowel "a" in マ to get マーク.

Okay, let's try this one.

おかあさん "mother"

It's written

か・あ. Don't read them separately—read them altogether as かー.

いい - ii

いい is twice the length of い.

Are you ready for some example words? Here goes!

シート "sheet"

As explained before, this mark ("ー") means that you need to prolong the vowel い in the preceding syllable, シ (shi).

Next is...

おじいさん "grandfather"

You don't say じ・い separately, but read them altogether as じー

うう - uu

うう is twice the length of う.

Here are some example words:

プール "pool"

すうじ "number"

ええ - ee

For example, the word for "cake" is...

ケーキ

Take a look at the word for "teacher":

せんせい

せんせい is made up of syllables せ・ん・せ・い. The last two syllables are not

pronounced as せ・い, but as せー. Therefore, a pair of え+い also makes a long vowel えー.

To recap, there are two combinations to make a long vowel えー, which are two え sounds and え+い.

So, can you read this?

えいご “English”

The えい part of えいご is pronounced as えー.

おお - oo

Have a look at these examples:

ノート “notebook”

こうえん “park”

This follows a rule parallel to え+い. The first two syllables こ・う are not pronounced as こ・う, but as こー with a long vowel oo. So, a pair of お+う also makes a long vowel おー.

To recap, there are 2 combinations to make a long vowel おー, which are 2 お sounds and お+う.

Language Tip

Why is it important to master long vowels? Because the meaning of a word can change depending on whether the vowel is long or short.

Let's look at some examples of how similar words change depending on the vowel length:

おばさん = “aunt”

おばあさん = “grandmother”

おじさん = “uncle”

おじいさん = “grandfather”

Long vowels are very important in Japanese. Practice pronouncing long vowels for the proper length of time by clapping to measure time.