

# The Japanese writing system

The Japanese written language consists of a combination of three types of characters. To a lesser extent it nowadays also uses some Latin alphabet for abbreviations and numbers.

## 1) Kanji (漢字)

*Kanji* originally came from China to Japan. The term “*kanji*” literally means “Han characters” or “Chinese characters” and it is identical to the characters in China to describe their writing.

*Kanji* are mainly used to describe names and nouns. When used in verbs and adjectives they mostly are written in combination with *hiragana*. Most sentences include *kanji* as well as *hiragana*.

Japanese dictionaries list around 10,000 *kanji*. The Japanese government limited the *kanji* used in official publications to the 1945 *touyou kanji* with about 4000 readings. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) is based on these 1945 *touyou kanji*.

A Japanese with average education knows around 3000 *kanji* and it is estimated that around 4000 *kanji* are used in Japanese literature.

## 2) Hiragana (平仮名)

*Hiragana* is a phonetic alphabet that was developed in the ninth century to simplify writing. It nowadays is mainly used for native Japanese words. *Hiragana* are derived from more complex *kanji* and each *hiragana* represents a syllable. A total of 46 *hiragana* are used in contemporary Japanese writing.

List of the 46 *hiragana* and their 25 diacritics (with ` or ° )

| A                | I                 | U                 | E                | O                |
|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| あ (a)            | い (i)             | う (u)             | え (e)            | お (o)            |
| か (ka)<br>が (ga) | き (ki)<br>ぎ (gi)  | く (ku)<br>ぐ (gu)  | け (ke)<br>げ (ge) | こ (ko)<br>ご (go) |
| さ (sa)<br>ざ (za) | し (shi)<br>じ (ji) | す (su)<br>ず (zu)  | せ (se)<br>ぜ (ze) | そ (so)<br>ぞ (zo) |
| た (ta)<br>だ (da) | ち (chi)<br>ぢ (ji) | つ (tsu)<br>づ (zu) | て (te)<br>で (de) | と (to)<br>ど (do) |
| な (na)           | に (ni)            | ぬ (nu)            | ね (ne)           | の (no)           |

| A      | I      | U      | E      | O        |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|----------|
| は (ha) | ひ (hi) | ふ (fu) | へ (he) | ほ (ho)   |
| ば (ba) | び (bi) | ぶ (bu) | べ (be) | ぼ (bo)   |
| ぱ (pa) | ぴ (pi) | ぷ (pu) | ぺ (pe) | ぽ (po)   |
| ま (ma) | み (mi) | む (mu) | め (me) | も (mo)   |
| や (ya) |        | ゆ (yu) |        | よ (yo)   |
| ら (ra) | り (ri) | る (ru) | れ (re) | ろ (ro)   |
| わ (wa) |        |        |        | を (o/wo) |
| ん (n)  |        |        |        |          |

The combination of some of these hiragana is used to express a few additional sounds used in Japanese. The first character is written in normal size whereas the second character is written a little bit smaller. These combinations are called digraphs.

List of 21 *hiragana* digraphs and their 15 diacritics

| YA                               | YU                               | YO                               |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| きゃ (kya)<br>ぎゃ (gya)             | きゅ (kyu)<br>ぎゅ (gyu)             | きょ (kyo)<br>ぎょ (gyo)             |
| しゃ (sha)<br>じゃ (ja)              | しゅ (shu)<br>じゅ (ju)              | しょ (sho)<br>じょ (jo)              |
| ちゃ (cha)<br>ぢゃ (ja)              | ちゅ (chu)<br>ぢゅ (ju)              | ちょ (cho)<br>ぢょ (jo)              |
| にゃ (nya)                         | にゅ (nyu)                         | にょ (nyo)                         |
| ひゃ (hya)<br>びゃ (bya)<br>ぴゃ (pya) | ひゅ (hyu)<br>びゅ (byu)<br>ぴゅ (pyu) | ひょ (hyo)<br>びょ (byo)<br>ぴょ (pyo) |
| みゃ (mya)                         | みゅ (myu)                         | みょ (myo)                         |
| りゃ (rya)                         | りゅ (ryu)                         | りょ (ryo)                         |

### 3) Katakana (片仮名)

*Katakana* also is a phonetic alphabet covering the same syllable as *hiragana* and it therefore also has 46 different characters. It is mainly used for foreign loanwords and sometimes to replace *kanji* or *hiragana* for emphasis. *Katakana* were developed in the ninth century and are also derived from more complex *kanji*.

List of the 46 basic *katakana* and their 25 diacritics (with ` or ° )

| A                          | I                          | U                          | E                          | O                          |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| ア (a)                      | イ (i)                      | ウ (u)                      | エ (e)                      | オ (o)                      |
| カ (ka)<br>ガ (ga)           | キ (ki)<br>ギ (gi)           | ク (ku)<br>グ (gu)           | ケ (ke)<br>ゲ (ge)           | コ (ko)<br>ゴ (go)           |
| サ (sa)<br>ザ (za)           | シ (shi)<br>ジ (ji)          | ス (su)<br>ズ (zu)           | セ (se)<br>ゼ (ze)           | ソ (so)<br>ゾ (zo)           |
| タ (ta)<br>ダ (da)           | チ (chi)<br>ヂ (ji)          | ツ (tsu)<br>ヅ (zu)          | テ (te)<br>デ (de)           | ト (to)<br>ド (do)           |
| ナ (na)                     | ニ (ni)                     | ヌ (nu)                     | ネ (ne)                     | ノ (no)                     |
| ハ (ha)<br>バ (ba)<br>パ (pa) | ヒ (hi)<br>ビ (bi)<br>ピ (pi) | フ (fu)<br>ブ (bu)<br>プ (pu) | ヘ (he)<br>ベ (be)<br>ペ (pe) | ホ (ho)<br>ボ (bo)<br>ポ (po) |
| マ (ma)                     | ミ (mi)                     | ム (mu)                     | メ (me)                     | モ (mo)                     |
| ヤ (ya)                     |                            | ユ (yu)                     |                            | ヨ (yo)                     |
| ラ (ra)                     | リ (ri)                     | ル (ru)                     | レ (re)                     | ロ (ro)                     |
| ワ (wa)                     |                            |                            |                            | ヲ (o/wo)                   |
| ン (n)                      |                            |                            |                            |                            |

As with hiragana there also are combinations to express the other sounds required for the Japanese language.

List of 21 *katakana* digraphs and their 15 diacritics

| YA                   | YU                   | YO                   |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| キャ (kya)<br>ギャ (gya) | キュ (kyu)<br>ギュ (gyu) | キョ (kyo)<br>ギョ (gyo) |
| シャ (sha)<br>ジャ (ja)  | シュ (shu)<br>ジュ (ju)  | ショ (sho)<br>ジョ (jo)  |
| チャ (cha)<br>ヂャ (ja)  | チュ (chu)<br>ヂュ (ju)  | チョ (cho)<br>ヂョ (jo)  |
| ニャ (nya)             | ニュ (nyu)             | ニョ (nyo)             |

| YA                               | YU                               | YO                               |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ヒヤ (hya)<br>ビヤ (bya)<br>ピヤ (pya) | ヒュ (hyu)<br>ビュ (byu)<br>ピュ (pyu) | ヒヨ (hyo)<br>ビヨ (byo)<br>ピヨ (pyo) |
| ミヤ (mya)                         | ミユ (myu)                         | ミヨ (myo)                         |
| リヤ (rya)                         | リュ (ryu)                         | リヨ (ryo)                         |

These 46 katakana and their variations are sufficient to express all sounds used for Japanese words. In order to get closer to the pronunciation of foreign words, a list of not so common extended *katakana* is used.

List of extended *katakana*

| A        | I        | U       | E         | O        |
|----------|----------|---------|-----------|----------|
|          | イイ (yi)  |         | イエ (ye)   |          |
| ウア (wa)  | ウィ (wi)  | ウウ (wu) | ウェ (we)   | ウォ (wo)  |
| ヴァ (va)  | ヴィ (vi)  | ヴ (vu)  | ヴェ (ve)   | ヴォ (vo)  |
|          |          |         | ヴィエ (vye) |          |
|          |          |         | キエ (kye)  |          |
|          |          |         | ギエ (gye)  |          |
| クア (kwa) | クイ (kwi) |         | クエ (kwe)  | クオ (kwo) |
| グア (gwa) | グイ (gwi) |         | グエ (gwe)  | グオ (gwo) |
|          |          |         | シェ (she)  |          |
|          |          |         | ジェ (je)   |          |
|          | スイ (si)  |         |           |          |
|          | ズイ (zi)  |         |           |          |
|          |          |         | チェ (che)  |          |
| ツア (tsa) | ツイ (tsi) |         | ツエ (tse)  | ツオ (tso) |
|          | ティ (ti)  | テウ (tu) |           |          |
|          | ディ (di)  | デウ (du) |           |          |
|          |          |         | ニエ (nye)  |          |
|          |          |         | ヒエ (hye)  |          |
|          |          |         | ビエ (bye)  |          |

| A       | I       | U       | E         | O       |
|---------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|
|         |         |         | ピエ (pye)  |         |
| ファ (fa) | フィ (fi) |         | フェ (fe)   | フォ (fo) |
|         |         |         | フィエ (fye) |         |
|         |         | ホウ (hu) |           |         |
|         |         |         | ミエ (mye)  |         |
|         |         |         | リエ (rye)  |         |
| ラ° (la) | リ° (li) | ル° (lu) | レ° (le)   | ロ° (lo) |

#### 4) Writing a Japanese text

It is possible to write everything in *hiragana* or *katakana* since both scripts cover the entity of sounds of the Japanese language, although this is not very practical due to the high number of words having the same pronunciation but different meanings.

All characters are written one by one and in the same size. There are no spaces between different words, which feels a little bit unusual for most foreigners. It takes time to get used to this and easily distinguish different words.

It is important to write the strokes in the correct order and directions to give the characters the right shape. The reason why becomes obvious when practicing with a brush pen<sup>1</sup>, which is very much recommended for beginners.

Japanese writing is made in two directions. Horizontal writing (*yokogaki*) is from the left to the right as in western style. Traditional writing (*tategaki*) is vertical starting from the right top and ending at the left bottom. A book printed in *tategaki* opens from what Westerners would call the back, while a book printed in *yokogaki* opens from what traditionally in Japan would have been considered the back.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A brush pen is a pen with a brush instead of a brush instead of the nib. You can get them in some Japanese shops or via mail order.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, Japanese writing system

1 stroke

Meaning: One  
 Onyomi: Ichi / Itsu [いち/いつ]  
 Kunyomi: Hito [ひと]  
 Vocabulary: 一口 - ひとくち - hitokuchi - One bite

To check the strokes order click on the link or search 4E00 on [Nihongo Ichiban](http://nihongoichiban.com)

★ 一 is just *one* stroke

| Radicals | 一<br>One |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| strokes  | 一        | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 |
| 一        | 一        | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 |
| 一        | 一        | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 |
| 一        | 一        | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 |
| 一        | 一        | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 | 一 |
| 一        |          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 一        |          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |



Japanese Food



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2 strokes

Meaning: Two  
 Onyomi: Ni [に]  
 Kunyomi: Futa [ふた]  
 Vocabulary: 二人 - ふたり - futari - Two persons

To check the strokes order click on the link or search 4E8C on [Nihongo Ichiban](http://nihongoichiban.com)

★ 二 is made of two strokes 一 + 一 = 二  
 1 + 1 = 2

| Radicals | 二<br>Two |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| strokes  | 一        | 二 | 三 | 四 | 五 | 六 | 七 | 八 | 九 | 十 |
| 二        | 二        | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 |
| 二        | 二        | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 |
| 二        | 二        | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 |
| 二        | 二        | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 |
| 二        | 二        | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 |
| 二        | 二        | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 |
| 二        | 二        | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 |
| 二        | 二        | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 | 二 |



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3 strokes

Meaning: Three  
 Onyomi: San [さん]  
 Kunyomi: Mitsu / Mi- [みつ/みっ]  
 Vocabulary: 3日 - みっか - mikka - The 3rd

To check the strokes order click on the link or search 4E09 on [Nihongo Ichiban](http://nihongoichiban.com)

★ 三 is the result of 一 + 二  
 $1 + 2 = 3$

| Radicals | 一<br>One | 二<br>Two |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------|----------|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| strokes  | 一        | 二        | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 |
| 三        | 三        | 三        | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 |
| 三        | 三        | 三        | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 |
| 三        | 三        | 三        | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 |
| 三        | 三        | 三        | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 | 三 |
| 三        |          |          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 三        |          |          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |



Lacquer Ware



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


























































5 strokes

Meaning: Four  
 Onyomi: Shi [シ]  
 Kunyomi: Yo / Yu / Yon [よ/ゆ/よん]  
 Vocabulary: 四季 - しき - shiki - The 4 seasons

To check the strokes order click on the link or search 56DB on [Nihongo Ichiban](http://nihongoichiban.com)

★ There are four sides to a square

| Radicals  | <br>Box | <br>Human legs |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| strokes   |         |                |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|    |         |                |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|  |       |              |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |       |              |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |       |              |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|  |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |



Calligraphy



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# 五

4 strokes

Meaning: Five  
 Onyomi: Go [ご]  
 Kunyomi: Itsu [いつ]  
 Vocabulary: 五つ - ひとつ - itsutsu - Five (ordinal number)

To check the strokes order click on the link or search 4E94 on [Nihongo Ichiban](http://nihongoichiban.com)

★ It looks like the number 5



| Radicals |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| strokes  | 一 | 乚 | ㇀ | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 |
| 五        | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 |
| 五        | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 |
| 五        | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 |
| 五        | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 | 五 |
| 五        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 五        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |



Uehara Inden Leather Ware



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# 六

4 strokes

Meaning:

Six

Onyomi:

Roku [ろく]

Kunyomi:

Mu/Mut/Mui [む/むっ/むい]

Vocabulary:

六つ - むつつ - muttsu - Six  
(ordinal number)

To check the strokes order click on the link or  
search 516D on [Nihongo Ichiban](http://nihongoichiban.com)

★ 6 can be written VI if you turn them  
around you get 六



| Radicals | 𠂇<br>Lid | 八<br>Eight |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------|----------|------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| strokes  | 六        | 六          | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 |
| 六        | 六        | 六          | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 |
| 六        | 六        | 六          | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 |
| 六        | 六        | 六          | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 |
| 六        | 六        | 六          | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 | 六 |
| 六        |          |            |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 六        |          |            |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |



Japanese Warosoku Candles



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# 七

2 strokes

Meaning: Seven  
 Onyomi: Shichi [しち]  
 Kunyomi: Nana/Nano [なな/なの]  
 Vocabulary: 七月 - しちがつ - shichigatsu  
 - July

To check the strokes order click on the link or search 4E03 on [Nihongo Ichiban](#)

★ It is a 7 inverted

7

| Radicals | 一<br>One | 乙<br>fish hook |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------|----------|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| strokes  | ㇏        | 七              | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 |
| 七        | 七        | 七              | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 |
| 七        | 七        | 七              | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 |
| 七        | 七        | 七              | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 |
| 七        | 七        | 七              | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 | 七 |
| 七        |          |                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 七        |          |                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |



Kiriko Cut Glass Craft



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