The Loop.

Every person has different preferences when approaching language studies and, while we all share the same baseline, we may prefer one way or the other.

At the end of the day, you should consider this loop as a loose guideline on how to orient yourself in the landscape of Japanese learning, and learn to take advantage of the various Japanese Learning Resources# at your disposal.

"I'm trying to free your mind, Neo, but I can only show you the door. You're the one that has to walk through it." - **The Matrix** (1999)

Step 0: Foundation

Do not skip this step. It's really simple, just learn hiragana and katakana .

You really *really* **really** *NEED* this.

Step 1: Basics

The three areas of **Grammar**, **Vocabulary**, and **Listening** should be done more or less at the same time, they are independent and parallel with each other, they will all equally help you unlock the path to the next stage when you are ready.

Grammar

You want be able to recognize word boundaries, which words are particles, how to conjugate basic verbs, how to connect very basic of ideas, etc.

There's many resources to be consulted at this step. I recommend Sakubi because it's a good quick read. Don't get stuck on the details, just read through it and follow its advice and philosophy. **You can only fully understand grammar after reading a lot of native material**. At this stage you just want to get a general impression of how the language **looks**. You can come back to it later as many times as you want if you need a refresher.

On the other hand, if you want a more structured, traditional, and slower approach, you can try a textbook like Genki or Japanese the Manga Way.

NOTE: When you get to verb conjugation, I strongly recommend giving a quick watch to these two videos for a basic overview. They are **very** good and straight to the point.

What is important to remember here is that you are the one to decide how far you want to take this. Your goal should be to transition to Step 2 as soon as you feel ready to immerse in **native** material. Don't linger too long on this, it is only a stepping stone to get you there.

Vocabulary

Knowing what words mean and how they are supposed to look is as important as knowing when/how to use them.

Anki Core Deck   The purpose of a starting core deck for Anki is to get you started with basic words that you absolutely need to be able to start reading native material on your own. Later you will be building your own deck as you learn new words, so don't get too attached to this one, it is but a starting point to get your feet wet in *useful* Japanese.

The core decks I recommend for beginners are the N5 and N4 tango decks in the ankidrone starter pack collection. Start from N5 and move to N4 after.

Don't get too hung up on finishing all of these decks (it's going to take you a very long time). Just adding a good 500-1000 words to your toolbelt will likely give you enough to get started and help you immensely for the next step.

There's various other starting decks for beginners, the most commonly recommended one is the so-called core6k deck.

Alternatively, if you want a deck that gets you up-to-speed faster, I recommend the VN-Core1250 deck. It contains the ~1200 most frequent words in Visual Novels. This also carries over really well for anime, manga, and videogames too.

One tip for Anki in general is to change the default settings, because they are horrible, so make sure to read up on that (Better Anki Settings) so you don't suffer from burnout.

I won't specifically tell you to skip the next **optional** step, because some people seem to get a lot out of it, however I did not do it myself and I'm not very enthusiastic about it. I'm mentioning this anyway in order to not deprive you of anything that might help you. Just realize that it's *not mandatory* and if you aren't into it, you can skip it without issues.

Listening

Japanese is a pitch accent language. A lot of people from English or other European language backgrounds are unaware of the role of pitch in other languages and are often even unable to properly hear it unless they specifically train for it.

While **this is not a big problem** (you can still communicate using the wrong pitch), learning how to **recognize** and **be aware** of pitch accent early on will be immensely beneficial to your pronunciation.

I **strongly** recommend you get this sorted out as early as possible.

With some extremely minimal amount of effort, you can make insane gains in your pitch awareness and pronunciation, and here's how:

1. Watch this Dogen video about the fundamentals of pitch accent (it's just 10 minutes)
2. Go to this pitch accent test site and see how many words you can get right.

NOTE: The test requires you to sign up with an account but you can give it any random username and pass and it won't matter. They don't even verify it.

TEST HEADING

Main Content

If you cannot maintain a score above 90% consistently, you need to train your hearing. Just keep doing the pitch accent test a little bit every day (you don't have to be too strict, just do it whenever you have time) until you can hit the 95~100% mark. Once you are aware of pitch, try to listen for it in every word and sentence you hear, it will change your life.

While it's always good to get acquainted with the phonetics, sounds, and pacing of the language, at this stage there's not much else you should worry about. Passive listening won't hurt you but it also won't help you that much, as you lack both the grammar and vocabulary to properly immerse actively in anything yet.

If you want, you can listen to Japanese music, leave some podcasts in the background, watch anime with English subtitles and pay attention to the dialogues, etc…

Step 2: The Loop

The Loop consists of one preparatory step, and three core steps to follow.

Sentence Mining Deck (preparation)

There's an overall guide on sentence mining and sentence cards on the Refold website.

The idea is that you read native material, find stuff that you don't know, and add it to this deck so you can review it later.

Once you have set up your mining deck and got the workflow down, you can begin *looping*.

Discovery Phase

Following Krashen's Input Hypothesis, we acquire language as we are exposed to **comprehensible input**.

Defining comprehensible input is tricky, but in layman's terms it simply means don't bite more than you can chew. You might be tempted to jump into complex material that interests you, but you are not going to have a good time if you cannot find a good balance between consumption and dictionary lookups.

Ideally you want to find material that gives you at least 90% comprehension. Having to look up one word or grammar point for every other sentence is a healthy balance in my opinion, but also don't be too strict about it. Try to **prioritize having a good time**, if you're feeling stressed out or aren't having fun because the material is boring, too simple, too hard, or anything in-between, find something else. The affective filter hypothesis tells us that **we acquire language more easily if we are having fun**, so that should be your absolute priority.

Only you know what you find enjoyable, don't let anyone else tell you otherwise.

If you are worried about what you **should** be reading, consider giving this article a read: Optimal Reading Immersion - Narrow Reading#. At the end of the day, it really doesn't matter. Just try to find stuff you enjoy and stick with it.

However, I'd recommend staying away from material specifically targeted to language learners (fake conversations, textbook readings, etc). Try to aim for young native material instead (children manga, etc).

For possible starting points, refer to Practical Tips to Facilitate Early Reading# and Beginner Japanese Immersion Material.

Consumption Phase

Once you have found what you want to consume, simply start reading.

I state *reading* here but there's multiple ways to consume native content. Do not skip on listening too. There's all kinds of native sources, both passive and active (as listed in the diagram). Do a little bit every day, don't think of it as studying or a chore that you need to do, **simply just do stuff you enjoy but do it in Japanese**. Consider giving this video a watch to get an idea of what I mean.

In this step it is **fundamental** that you become aware that **Japanese is a real language**. It's not just something you study in school and drill exercises on. You need to make it a part of your life, and enjoy doing so.

Improvement Phase

Whenever you find some word or grammar you do not understand, look it up using the approaches explained in Unlocking Japanese: Tricks

If you are using Bunpro, follow the advice in Fitting Bunpro in your study routine for grammar mining as well. At this step, you are in the **Loop** for Bunpro too, so don't neglect it.

As you see fit, add new words or sentences to your sentence mining deck, and repeat. When you run out of material, go back to the **Discovery Phase** and find something new to consume.

Once you start to feel more confident in your input, and you feel like you want to challenge yourself in starting to output as well, take a look at the Learning to Output# page.

Step 3: Fluency

Here be dragons. I can show you no path to get here. The only thing that can get you here is yourself. Be consistent and keep doing at least a little every day. Language acquisition is **not a sprint, it is a marathon**.

Also remember that fluency means different things for different people and its objective definition is not something you should be concerned about.

Just loop.