A Year to Learn Japanese

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Foreword

Hey there! I'm u/SuikaCider and, two odd years ago, I responded to a post by a guy who said he had a year to learn Japanese. This was actually my first post to Reddit and, unsure what to expect, I wrote a much longer reply than was necessary.

Wordy as it was, the post was quite well received. I've since gotten several dozen messages from people seeking clarifications or asking questions that were beyond the scope of my original post. I've kept track of these (here), and it eventually became so chaotic that I decided to organize it.

That in mind, I've got a couple goals with this document.

- I'd like to replace the old sticky with one that's easier to follow
- I'd like to include reflections on learning, both about language and in general
- I'd like to expand the scope of the original post to include questions I've since gotten
- I'd like to reach out to people who learn languages for reasons beside reading, hopefully making this document relevant to a wider audience.

Introduction

The post I originally responded to was by a user in /r/LanguageLearning who explained that they had one year to prepare and wanted to learn as much as possible before going to Japan.

Similarly, many people want to know how long it will take to learn Japanese and, based on their unique circumstances, whether or not they can do it within a certain period of time. I want to briefly touch on both of these questions before getting started.

How long does it take to learn Japanese?

This question is difficult to answer, but a few organizations have tried to do so. There is a discouraging (yet understandable) lack of congruence in the numbers they've put forward.

- The JLPT themselves estimated that it will take about 900 hours to pass the N1
- The US Government estimates it will take around 2,200 hours.
- A 2010-2015 study of students studying Japanese full time, in Japan, estimates that it will take 3,000-4,800 hours for students without a background in kanji to pass the N1.
- I'll take the N1 in summer 2020. My numbers might not be particularly relevant, given that all I wanted out of the language was something to read and thus never focused on the JLPT, but I've so far spent ~5,000 hours on Japanese.

Whatever you might take from them, these numbers don't really tell us all that much and the reader is usually left with unanswered questions, for example:

- What does an hour of studying entail in the first place?
- Are all hours of these "hours" equal in nature? Are some more valuable than others?
- Do they have to be "hours of study"? What about hours conversing? Reading?
- How should you block out those hours—all at once, or in short bursts?
- How proficient must you be to say that you have "learned" Japanese, anyway?

The only answer I can possibly give you is that learning Japanese takes a lot of time, and depending on your particular goals, it might take more or less time. Reaching a conversational proficiency takes comparatively little time, for example.

If you've never thought about what level of proficiency you'll actually need to do what you want, check out this graphic about what sort of sentences different CEFR levels can make.

Anthony Lauder on measuring time spent studying

Anthony Lauder, author of the Fluent Czech blog, suggests that we focus on minutes, not years. His suggestion comes from a quote by the pianist Michel Petrucciani:

> *Every hour I am at the piano feels like a minute.*
> *Every minute I am at the piano feels like an hour.*

Forming the crux of his video, Anthony ultimately suggests that the secret to learning a language is *to absolutely love it:*

> [To study in such a way that] Studying isn't a chore, merely a task to get out of the way so that you can reach that fluency you lust for—no. Lust fizzles. But if you *love* the language, if you love the language learning process—those hours, those months, and those years—they'll fly by, and it'll feel like minutes. **And that's the way to fluency; to fall in love with the process**… and then to do what you love, for hours and hours a day, for years and years, but for it to feel like minutes.

This idea of "loving" the language has been an integral part of my personal learning philosophy. I believed that the only thing I could be confident of was that learning Japanese was going to take a lot of time, so I wanted to be sure that I would enjoy myself.

As Lydia Machova, a polyglot who interviewed lots of other polyglots, says: *We aren't geniuses… the one thing we all have in common is that we [find] ways to enjoy the language learning process...all of us use different methods, but they make sure it's something they personally enjoy.*

If you come out of this post with anything, I hope you come out of it with a furrowed brow, curious about how you can connect Japanese to the things that are important to you.

Why learn Japanese?

I personally love reading, so I made a job of finding something that I wanted to read in Japanese—something that wasn't available in English and that I wasn't yet good enough at japanese to read. It turned out to be a collection of short stories by 結城昌治 (Yuuki Shouji), a guy who doesn't even have an English Wikipedia page.

I believe that everybody will learn a language to as proficient a level as they need to—no better, no worse—and that, frankly, most people have zero need to learn a language. So far as I'm concerned, then, step one for every single learner is creating a reason to learn Japanese that is concrete enough that it enables you to personally justify the time you're about to spend on it.

Your first job is figuring out why you are going to learn Japanese.

About this document, about me

About Me: Should you listen to me?

I've gone from zero to (at least) functional in four languages: Spanish, Japanese, Russian and Mandarin. I've also done this mostly over a span of ~5 years, and looking at so many languages over such a short time frame means that I'm far from perfect in any of them. I'm planning to take the N1 later this year, plus a B2 exam for Spanish. Maybe the HSK5, if I get around to it.

- I have lived in Russia, Japan and Taiwan; these languages have been parts of my daily life.
- I love reading. I care *much* more about literature than conversation/movies.
- I like writing. I've written for FluentU, LingQ and random stuff on Reddit.
- I tutor adults and also do test prep; I've seen the results of many learning styles.
- I don't have any certifications, but [here's a video of me speaking my languages].

In short, *no*. I don't think that I am qualified to teach you Japanese. I don't plan on doing so.

About This Document: What am I doing here?

While I don't feel comfortable giving you lessons on Japanese grammar or a history of the kanji, that doesn't bother me too much. There are knowledgeable and passionate people who have already made (many) resources doing so, and I *do* feel comfortable pointing you towards that content.

After four languages, more than anything, I feel comfortable talking about the big picture behind what learning a language entails. I've learned formally and informally, with and without immersion, as a broke student and as an adult working 60 hours/week, via English and via my target language.

My goal here is to guide you to a point where you can begin focusing on immersion, learning by doing the things you enjoy doing. In my personal experience, I felt ready to start immersing at around the N3 level. In this document I'll talk about what you need to do to get there.

Think of this as being a kind of interactive syllabus, or maybe a map. I'll tell you generally where you need to go, organize lots of resources so that you can go more efficiently and help you plan your route. Ultimately, though, a map is just a piece of paper. You've got to do the learning by yourself.

As an aside, I don't have anything to sell you, either. I will make zero profit from this.

About this document: TL;DR

This entire document can be summed up in a few bullet points. It is:

- A reflection on my journey through Japanese, loosely organized into a timeline
- An organized compilation of resources that I used while learning
- A lot of discussion on how learning works, with further reading

On the structure of this document

There are many different types of people, and all of these people conceptualize, approach, deal with and reflect on the problems they encounter in their own ways.

The only way I can think of to ensure that this document can be valuable to as many people as possible is to provide a malleable template that can be filled in. I've included much more information than I think anybody should care about, at least to start with, and broken it up into several different tiers of commitment. I expect that you will do your own trimming.

That in mind, each chapter is comprised of a few different sections, not always in order:

- **Opening Words**

  I'll begin each section by telling you how I'm going to approach it and why.

- **Ask a Polyglot / Linguist / Well-known figure in the community**

  I reached out to several people who are very knowledgeable about the content of a given section, interviewed them, then summed our talk up into a few actionable insights.

- **Discussion**

  I'll do my best not to ramble, but in this section I won't worry about being concise, either. I might try to justify the inclusion of a given section or its placement, I might just give a general overview of my thought process, I might have an odd fixation on something and spend much more space to cover it than necessary. Who knows.

- **Homework**

  During this section I'll be as concise™ as possible, simply stating the minimum you need to do before moving onto the next section. Generally speaking, that is one or two steps.

  Extra Credit will also be included for people who think a given section/skill is important enough that they don't mind devoting more than the bare minimum to it. This content is to be worked through in spare time while you're progressing ahead with the guide.

My hope is that if I provide multiple levels of depth—a minimum, a compromise, and then more long term/thorough stuff—you'll choose your own "solution" and get more mileage out of this.

The Timeline

I began my original post by stating that one year was an obnoxious timeline, and I will do the same here. I have never taught anybody Japanese; I have no idea if this is feasible, let alone reasonable. Please do not take this as a tried, tested, or foolproof timeline. It's not. (But will hopefully become moreso over time with feedback. Please let me know how your progress goes and what you feel more reasonable numbers are.)

What I can say is that I only spoke English until I was 20, but now at age 25 am comfortable reading, watching dramas, and chatting in Japanese. I don't have a special knack for languages—I studied Spanish for five years before Japanese, but only got to an ~A2 level—so I'm sure that you can find your way through Japanese, too. A lot of learning a language is learning how you (*you*) learn.

Here's a zoomed-out timeline of my personal year through Japanese:

> **Year One**: I spent a year at a university in Japan; 4 days of Japanese per week.
> **Year Two**: I returned to the US; no Japanese coursework available, so I slowly revised Kanji.
> **Year Three**: I returned to Japan; didn't like my classes, focused on reading/immersion.
>
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>
> **Year Four**: I moved to Russia for work; lots of reading, got into j-dramas..
> **Year Five**: I moved to Taiwan for work; even more reading, got into Japanese standup.
> **Year Six:** I began taking freelance translation work, and started focusing on Mandarin.

As you can see, you can make progress even if you aren't a perfect student. I wrote my original post figuring that if you were to study more consistently and without so many breaks, you could probably even accomplish in one year what I did in three. This is how I'd approach doing so.

Keep in mind that this is just an ideal. Life, commitments and other obligations can get in the way, so I don't know if anyone will be able to complete this in the given time. That being said, I do know that literally everything I've done is contained within the pages of this timeline, just in a more organized format (read as: minus the year long gap and resultant backtracking), and I now speak Japanese.

Whether or not you manage to keep to the given timeline, if you follow along, then I believe you'll eventually reach a point where you can start doing whatever you want in Japanese—even if it takes you longer than my proposed year.

If I were an ideal student, in an ideal environment and with an ideal mindset, this is what my journey through Japanese might have looked like:

Day 0: Start here

Generally speaking, I'm a big believer in *using* Japanese rather than *preparing* to use Japanese. To that end, I've done my best to link you to stuff only once it becomes relevant to what you're doing at each stage of the timeline. I don't want to waste your time with stuff that you don't need, and I don't want to go to the trouble of finding resources that nobody else will use.

Unfortunately, even after a lot of spring cleaning, I still found myself with some stuff that I wasn't sure what to do with. That in mind, everything in this first section is either:

1. *Foundational*; I think it provides context important to the document as a whole
2. *Giving me a headache*; I think it's important, but wasn't sure where else to put it.

If you're really going to give me such power over your life as to let me play a hand in blocking out the next year of it, please take a bit of time to look into where the ideas I'm presenting to you come from. It would be unfortunate if you disagreed with me on a fundamental level but only discovered that six months from now.

First, two general suggestions about approaching this document:

- Appropriate and repurpose my timeline to fit your needs—or even discard it completely if you really feel uncertain about something. This is your own learning.

- I'm about to list 11 suggestions of stuff I think would be beneficial to look into before you start with day 1. For here, and for every other page of the document, I'm absolutely not expecting all of this to be done in one sitting (or even at all).

  Break it into multiple sessions, read one per day, anything goes. You know how you work.

So, anyhow, your first homework assignments:

1. **See Bakadesuyo's compendium on *Achieving Goals: Everything you need to know***

   Learning, in some sense, is a process of consistently achieving goals. But how do we actually achieve goals? This is a repository with dozens of links about doing so, most of them connected to scholarly articles and published books you can look further into.

   Just take a gander and click on anything that seems interesting. We're constantly setting goals in one way or another, so take some time to learn how to set better ones.

2. **Check out Kolb's Learning Cycle**

   Learning isn't just something that happens; it's a pretty well documented process. Take some time to figure out how learning works so you can go about it in a way that is actually useful for you.

   I like Kolb's model, and I think it helps put the concepts of *input* and *output* in context. If you're missing any of these four steps, you aren't learning as effectively as you could be.
   - Kolb's Learning Cycle: The four steps we must go through to learn anything (p1)
   - Kolb's Learning Styles: The four different styles of learners

   (Relevant: *Take the Time to Learn How to Learn*)

3. **Get to know Hermann Ebbinghaus and his contributions to the study of memory**

   Memorization is an unavoidable part of language learning, and if you've ever spent 5 minutes on Reddit or Googled for advice about better memorizing stuff, you've almost certainly stumbled onto stuff that has roots in Ebbinghaus.

   For now, I'd like you to just ponder over a few of his major ideas

   - The Forgetting Curve:
     You're going to forget pretty much everything you ever learn, and over the course of just a few days at that, but we can strengthen these memories. Hermann advocates for the use of spaced repetition (the idea that tools like Anki and Memrise are based upon) and mnemonics (little stories to help you remember stuff -- **N**ever **E**at **S**hredded **W**heat).

   - The Learning Curve:
     Have you ever heard something referred to as having a *steep learning curve*? If so, you're familiar with Ebbinghaus. No matter how smart you are or how serious you approach learning, you're not going to master this on the first try… but most things

get easier with time and/or trials.

- The Serial Positioning Effect:
  We recall the first and last item in a series better than items in the middle of it. In other words, it's good to break up your studying across multiple sessions - doing so gives you more *first* and *last* items. (*aka the 'priming' and 'recency' effects*)

4. **Check out some timelines/reflections put together by other people**

You're about to read my timeline, and it's heavily steeped in my personal biases and preferences. Yours might not be the same. Plus, my resources might be a bit outdated: I haven't followed new apps about learning Japanese for three or four years.

Check out what other people think to get a better feel for what is established advice (ie, it's not just me saying this) and then what stuff is just me going off on my rocker (and you can likely discard if it doesn't jive with you).

I'll periodically update the below list with new content as I stumble into it. I will also include links I'm directed to if they aren't low-effort cash grabs (ie, if you've written something that you think should be included here, PM me a link on Reddit).

Stuff with a product behind them

- 365 days, 500 hours of Japanese by u/Kidvibe
- Hacking Japanese Supercourse by u/Nukemarine (see also: LLJ / SGJL)
- Learn Japanese: A Ridiculously Detailed Guide by Tofugu

Other peoples' timelines

- Resources by JLPT level / JLPT study guides by u/[Deleted] :'(
- All Japanese All The Time (AJATT) by Khatzumoto
- Genki Survival Guide by u/Kymus
- Two Years of Japanese Resources by u/Jo-Mako
- The Mass Immersion Approach by Matt vs Japan and Yoga
- Two years of studying + a year in Tokyo by u/Oleandersun
- How I kinda okay at Japanese in 24 months by u/Renalan
- My Japanese Year-in-Review by u/Romelako

5. **Thinking about paying for something?**

If you're thinking about paying for any resource, whether it's one I've suggested or you've found yourself, please first do some research about it on All Language Resources (the hub for reviews of resources about language learning resources - here is how they do reviews)

6. **Become aware of mindfulness in language learning** (pun intended)

   The concept of mindfulness pervades my entire learning philosophy. I think that achieving a high level in anything *requires* being mindful. My favorite introduction to mindfulness is The Four Roads to Happiness by Osha Taigu (EN subtitles).

   The four principles of happiness shared in this video ultimately make up the backbone of my entire language learning philosophy. They are, paraphrased, as follows:

   - **Some things make you feel good** (productive, fulfilled, motivated, whatever); figure out what these things are, do more of them.
   - **Take steps to ensure that you can continue doing these things**, or that you won't enter a situation where you can't do them (I like reading; I take a book with me everywhere, just in case I have downtime).
   - **Some things makes you feel bad** (burned out, regretful, whatever); figure out what these things are, do less of them.
   - **Take steps to ensure that you don't accidentally wind up doing these things** (I often sleep in till noon on Saturdays, my only free day of the week. I immediately regret this because… well... It wastes my only free day. It also throws off my sleep schedule for the coming week. I've begun scheduling iTalki lessons for 9:00 AM on Saturday. It forces me out of bed and ensures that my day begins with something important to me).

     Ideally, if you apply these steps, **your learning will become progressively more tailored to what works for you**. Eventually, as Petrucciani comments, language learning becomes an integral and indispensable part of who you are.

7. **Understand the Pareto Principle**

   Not everything is worth your time; according to the Pareto principle, 80% of the value you'll derive from this comes from 20% of the content. Depending on what you personally want out of Japanese, different parts of this guide are going to be more or less important to you.

   For example, pitch accent is a pretty hot topic in the Japanese learning community and it's an important part of developing a natural accent. That being said, Steve Kaufman, a polyglot, doesn't worry about it because he "isn't a perfectionist and is quite prepared to be imperfect in [some aspects of] a variety of languages… " he says, "whereas in [Matt vs Japan's] case, [he's] focusing on one [language] and wants to be as complete as he can be in [Japanese]." Steve also prefers massive input to spaced repetition.

   He concludes, "**All of these things are *choices*, and for different choices there are different solutions**"

For me, this is the main point of the Pareto Principle.

- Understand what you want to get out of Japanese
- Do more of the stuff that moves you closer to that goal
- Do less of the stuff that doesn't

8. **A Mind for Numbers: How to Excel at Science and Math**

This is a super cool book about learning that is applicable to everything. I've already covered some of these ideas, but I'll also list them here just for the sake of thoroughness. All of these are major concepts that will lead to more learning efficiency; work through them over time, see what resonates with you and try to incorporate them into your learning routine.

- Active Recall
- Test Yourself (I'll just again suggest you read the stuff in point 3)
- "Chunk" Information (II)
- Spaced Repetition
- "Interleaving"
- Take breaks in a structured fashion
- Explanatory Questioning (explain what you're learning by making a metaphor out of something else -- like the mustard seed analogy I make to begin the *phonetics* section)
- Focus
- The 90/90/1 rule

9. **How to make a behavior addictive**

Some habits stick, others don't. Why? She introduces Tony Robbins' *six human needs* and suggests that any behavior which meets 3 of the 6 criteria will become addictive.

- **Certainty:** A certainty to avoid pain and gain pleasure. If you do X, you'll get Y.
- **Variety:** While certain, [thing] isn't dull; there's spontaneity and new engaging stimuli.
- **Significance**: [Behavior] makes you feel special or unique
- **Connection**: A feeling that you're part of a community of people [who also do the thing]
- **Growth**: While doing [thing], you get the feeling that you're improving/progressing
- **Contribution**: While doing [thing], you get a feeling that you're helping others

A lot of people dabble with languages and never really achieve any notable level with proficiency; if this sounds like you, spend some time figuring out how the things you consider integral to your life meet these criteria. How can Japanese become significant, too? Do you even want it to? Does your life have room for another "significant" thing?

10. **Figure out if you're in love, or if you're in "fish love"**

    In a video discussing love, Rabbi Dr, Abraham Twerski points out an interesting way in which our language allows us to skew our perception of reality. *You don't love fish*, he says, *you love to eat fish. True love is a love of giving, not a love of receiving.*

    Similarly, when we say "I want to learn Japanese", I think that there's more there than meets the eye. Very few people are really saying that they want to do the very pure and sterile thing that is *learning* Japanese; they want to do something that, for whatever reason, they feel they can only do in Japanese—or, at the least, that would be better done in Japanese.

    Whatever it is that you really want, you might not actually need Japanese to do that thing. I think that being excited about Japanese will enable you to do can only lead to frustration and failure; you should be excited about the process, the way that you're spending your time right now. If not, you might want to re-think your interest in learning Japanese.

    It takes a long time to learn any language, and that's a lot of time that you could be instead spending on the thing that you actually want to do.

11. **Look into some linguistic theory**.

    People have been interested in how to best approach learning a language since.. well.. forever, probably. Take some time to skim the major approaches, then reflect on how/why they do or don't align with your personal values.

    u/TottoriJPN condensed several major approaches into takeaways and TL;DR's.
    - Learning Methods 101: Natural Methods
    - Learning Methods 102: Linguistic Methods

    u/Virusnzz has created an extensive starter's guide that addresses many FAQs, provides advice on different aspects of language learning and introduces many key concepts.

    u/Nonebb has created an in depth outline of several language-learning strategies for different types of learners that includes further reading and supplemental activities.

Day 1: Phonetics

Fair warning
There's a lot here, and I expect you to decide how much of it you care about going through for yourself. Complete the first level, dabble in the others as you progress through the timeline.

If you ever feel like you're grating teeth, just move on. This isn't school and you aren't going to lose points on a test or something because you goof a vowel here or a pitch there. What's important is just getting through it: you'll always have time to fill gaps in later. I once told a teacher that she was frightening (***ko****wai****)*** instead of cool/cute (***ka****waii)*, and although she let out a very audible sigh, she didn't hate me nor did she fail me. Class went on as normal.

If you take any overarching lessons from this first section, it should be just getting in the habit of occasionally coming back to stuff from time to time.

Mustard seeds, concentric rings and language learning
I'm personally not religious, but I was good friends with a Mormon girl growing up, and I sometimes visited the temple on Sundays to hang out with her. One day there was a speaker who implored that we *stand proud in the garden of our faith, even if it is but the size of a mustard seed, and water it. The nature of a garden is to grow, and if you nurture your speck of dirt, it too will expand. Where you once had mud, you'll before long find a lush and self-sustaining garden. That's faith.*

Again, I'm not religious, but I like that. I think it is applicable to most things in life. I believe that language is an ever expanding series of concentric rings, and that a lot of language learning is just understanding which ring you're currently standing in, working through the hurdles that are relevant to you. If we take the time to "water" the seeds of our language now, dutifully tending to our "garden" of knowledge and giving it the time it needs to grow, it will do so. Inevitably.

These concentric rings start out being quite small and studying is exciting - we fill out "rings" of knowledge relatively quickly and progress is very visible. Unfortunately, our perception of progress greatly diminishes as we go on, approaching the intermediate plateau (part II). Different stuff is and isn't accessible depending on which "ring" we're in; what you'll take from the same resource as a day one learner and as a day 1,000 learner isn't the same.

The first ring, your mustard seed, the foundation upon which everything you will ever do in Japanese rests, is pronunciation. But, Japanese is *not* completely foreign to you; you already know several of the sounds within it. Once we flesh out those sounds we can attach an alphabet to them (two, actually), and with letters we can begin building everything that has meaning.

Phonetics: Making the right sounds

Pronunciation Homework

The stuff in the overview is important to me, but it might not be important to you, and that's perfectly okay. It comes down to how natural of an accent you want to have. Understand that:

- Japanese sh (/ɕ/) and English sh (/ʃ/) are *not* the same… but people will understand you just fine, even if you always pronounce し as /ʃ/. You'll just sound foreign.
- Pitch accent *is* a thing, and it *is* a big thing—but unlike Mandarin or Vietnamese, people will be able to understand even if you frequently make mistakes. You'll just sound foreign.
- This more or less goes for every other point I bring up in the pronunciation section.

For now, just complete Level I—it will take thirty minutes. If you'd like to approach pronunciation in more depth, work through the Level II / Level III tasks over time as you're progressing through the rest of the timeline.

These levels are loosely based on the philosophy outlined by Antimoon in their post *why pronunciation is important* and The Mimic Method, so consider checking them out, too.

> **Level I** is preparation for Antimoon Step 1, introducing the basic knowledge you'll need.
> **Level II** expands on that; there's a lot to pronunciation, here's where I personally start.
> **Level III** corresponds to Antimoon steps 2-7. These steps basically all amount to beginning to apply the knowledge that you surveyed in Levels I + II.

But before we get started:

> *When we speak with a foreign accent, what we do is we take patterns that we know from our native languages… and then apply them to English. We don't do it consciously, that's just what organically comes to us. But if the patterns of our native tongues are different than those of English, the result is that the… message... isn't going to be clear.*
>
> *Although you know how to construct the sentence, the words are accurate and you don't make any grammar mistakes… but if you don't distinguish the right words, if you don't stress the right words and put emphasis on the words that are stressed, you become unclear.*
>
> ***[Pronunciation is about] recognizing your speech patterns and listening to how native speakers speak, which helps you to understand how English should be spoken.***
>
> ~ *Hadar Shemesh on Melody, Stress and Rhythm in American intonation*

Level I: If all you care about is being understood:

You might not care about developing a natural accent, and I'm not about to try convincing you one way or the other. As a rule, I'm going to do my best to simply provide an overview of what options exist, point you to relevant information about each, then let you make your own decisions.

That being said, even if you don't care about pronunciation at all, I'll ask you to spend 30 minutes working through the below videos. These are the most fundamental things you should know about Japanese pronunciation, and if nothing else, you'll benefit from at least being aware of them.

1. Watch Fluent Forever's video on Japanese writing systems + pitch accent (10m)
2. Watch Fluent Forever's video on Japanese consonants (12m)
3. Watch Fluent Forever's video on Japanese vowels (8m)

4. Japanese words are composed of kana (hiragana or katakana). Every single kana gets a single metronome beat of equal length. かんじ is pronounced ka-n-ji, not kan-ji. English tends to chunk sounds together (what are you → wha'cha). Japanese doesn't chunk.
5. English has a pretty complex vowel system; the letter *a* represents some seven different sounds. Japanese vowels are pretty simple. あ is あ is あ is あ. Be consistent.

Level II: If you'd like to 80/20 pronunciation, take things a bit further

We're going to explore the IPA of English and Japanese in a bit more detail. These are all quite big concepts—don't approach them all at once. Go through one item and reflect on it for awhile, then once you feel relatively comfortable with it, move on to Level III and begin applying this knowledge to refine your Japanese pronunciation.

This stage is all about learning to *hear* well. As Matt from MIA says:

> *[The root of a good accent] is being able to actually hear what [a given sound] is supposed to sound like—and once you have that down, learning how to actually produce [that sound] and get your tongue moving in the right way is not so difficult.*
>
> *Whenever you're listening to your target language, you're hearing it through the filter of your native language. All the sounds are going to [seem] a little closer to your native language, and this is why people end up with strong foreign accents...* ***You'll never be able to surpass your own level of perception; you're never going to be able to pronounce things more accurately than you're able to hear****… if you're concerned with improving your pronunciation, what you really have to do is hone your listening skills, and get better at hearing the different sounds in a language.*

Stuff to read:

1. Read Antimoon's introductory post on why pronunciation is important
   (TL;DR: it's the single biggest thing affecting peoples' [first] impression of your Japanese).
2. Read through Tofugu's long form post on Japanese pronunciation. It introduces a variety of phonetic concepts with Japanese as a backdrop; this will supplement Level I.
3. Read through IWTYAL's TL;DR tips on Japanese pronunciation. They're small, zero-effort things that will improve your pronunciation without requiring you to learn anything new.

Stuff to explore:

4. Figure out what the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is and why we use it.
5. Learn about the 3 concepts that every IPA symbol is shorthand for: Place of Articulation, Manner of Articulation and Voicing. All sounds are combinations of these three things (and other elements of prosody). Don't memorize—just get your head around it.
6. Start contrasting the sounds that exist in English and Japanese. For now, just play a game of hide and seek—pick a symbol on the English page, see if you can find it on the Japanese page. Your goal is to find the sounds that are in English but *not* in Japanese.

   It takes nothing but awareness to not make these sounds, and your Japanese will sound better for it. A lot of pronunciation is just knowing what to listen for.

7. In the above videos from Fluent Forever, Gabriel introduces several sounds that are "similar to the ones in English" and several that are "new". Here's how you can use the IPA to learn how to make the tricky sounds that are new to you; work through these new sounds.

Stuff to ponder:

8. Start exploring the concept of prosody. Don't memorize, just explore.

   Understanding how English prosody works will help you become aware of the patterns in your own speech, many of which will be bad habits when speaking Japanese.
   Stress, Rhythm & Melody | Connected Speech & Phrasing | Intonation & Pitch (dude)

   After you learn about how intonation works in English, start listening for these elements of prosody in Japanese. What's similar, what's different? How? Do Japanese people "chunk" their speech, for example? *If you can't hear [a sound]*, Hadar says, *you won't be able to say it*.

9. Many learners struggle with how pitch works in Japanese. You could approach it in a lot more depth (and here's why you might want to), but these videos are free, so start here.

   - Dogen on Japanese Pitch-Accent in 10 minutes
   - Matt from MIA on getting your head around and learning pitch accent (2k words)
   - I made a comment about pitch vs stress vs tone in EN/JP/MN; maybe it's helpful.

   Japaneasy - Mora and Pitch Accent (7m)
   Yas - Intro to Pitch Acecnt: Heiban vs Odaka patterns (17m)
   Yas - Pitch Accent II: Atamadaka and Nakadaka pitch accent (7m)
   Yas - Intonation vs pitch accent (7m)
   Yas - Intonation of sentence ending particles 'よ' and 'ね' (6m)

   MIA - Thinking about word-level pitch accent (15m)
   UBC eNunciate! - Pitch Accent at the Sentence Level (3m)

Stuff to practice:

10. I wrote quite a long post about how you can begin practicing these phonetic ideas with music. If you're more technically inclined, you might find it valuable to download Audacity (free) and learn how to flowverlap, too. Try it once, keep at it if you like it.

Idahosa's Input
Our end goal is being able to mimic the mouth movements of a Japanese person, and the IPA is just a means to that end. The IPA is a step-by-step guide that tells you how to move and use your mouth: so if you aren't already familiar with how your mouth works, it won't be very useful. As you're learning about this stuff, make sure you're connecting it to what's physically going on inside your mouth.

Level III: If you don't mind devoting some time to this

At this stage you should have surveyed quite a lot of ideas about Japanese pronunciation and how sound works. Now that you've got some tangible ideas to play with, I'd like you to play.

Unless you're into imitating celebrities or something, you probably haven't thought critically about pronunciation before. Thankfully, we have Hadar; she's from Israel and an excellent example of what a near-native accent sounds like. She offers tons of lessons on pronunciation concepts.

Here's her advice for people teaching pronunciation; if you're planning to teach yourself, you should be finding means to go through all of these steps alone. (some suggestions, also put into action II).

Japanese vs English Phonetics

1. Take a chart of English consonants and, using a different color, start filling in Japanese's consonants. What sounds do they share? Which ones are unique to either language?

2. Now do the same thing for vowels. English vowels vs Japanese vowels. If you don't understand this chart, learn about how Vowel Quadrilaterals work (he speaks *very* quietly, turn volume up!) and this video talking about vowel qualities. (vowels in more detail)

3. Work through Wikipedia's entry on Japanese phonology. There's a lot there—start with the sections on consonants, vowels and sound change. Explore anything that seems useful or interesting.

Intonation: Pitch Accent

4. Consider working through Dogen's course on Japanese Phonetics (mostly pitch accent). Contributing $10.00 to his Patreon account gives you access to the course for a month. It's quite thorough, very accessible and able to be completed within this month. The first 3 episodes are available for free.

   I think Dogen's content is great for "Stage 1" learning (see the grammar discussion); it introduces you to major concepts in Japanese pronunciation, what they mean and how they work. Understanding these concepts is just the beginning, though. You need to put in a lot of legwork before you'll be able to confidently hear and apply them to your Japanese.

5. Nouns have one of four patterns and verbs/adjectives have two pattern sets, but the pattern for V/ADJ's isn't the same in every conjugated form. Download the NHK Ojad Pitch Accent Deck put together by MIA and just play around for awhile.

   (a) learn to recognize each pitch accent pattern in isolation, and
   (b) look for patterns in the pitch/conjugation tables. Do you notice any consistencies?

Alternatively, just take a bunch of words of the same pattern and paste them into Ojad.

6. Start paying attention whenever you listen to anything in Japanese. The patterns will be more difficult to make out in natural Japanese and you'll also hear stuff that you don't expect because word-level pitch accent sort of goes out the window at the sentence level (another angle on this from MIA).

7. If you care enough about pitch accent to spend time memorizing patterns, look into the Anki addon MIA Japanese Support. Among other things, it assigns each pitch pattern a color and then color codes anki words by their pitch pattern. It's *much* easier to associate a word with "blue-ness" than "heiban", in my personal experience.

    a. Later on in the guide, I'm going to suggest using the Core 2k Vocab deck. If you decide to use it, and you also care about pitch accent, you might as well use the MIA Japanese Support addon to learn about pitch accent along the way for free.

    b. MIA heavily advocates for mining your own vocabulary sentences, particularly after a certain comprehension threshold is reached. If you plan on doing so, the MIA Dictionary Addon makes the process of creating cards much more efficient.

8. Here's a pitch accent resources dump on the WaniKani forums. There's quite a bit of useful stuff; beginners might be most interested in this pitch accent companion for Genki I + II.

A More Guided Course in IPA

9. So far as I know, Fluent Forever is currently the only app available that puts an emphasis on IPA. It was originally a series of pronunciation trainers that got turned into an app. (*Know more apps / accessible resources for IPA? Let me know*). They don't have a Japanese language pack up (yet?), but given that the IPA is relatively universal, some people might find it worthwhile to use their free trial going through the IPA of another language.

    I've written a more thorough writeup of what I think about the app in a comment on the Korean subreddit.

Some more detailed introductions to phonetics

10. Work through the links I provided in the overview to learn more about pronunciation in general. You might check out Artifexian's videos on pronunciation (videos 1-9), this introduction to phonetics, this introduction to phonology, and the conceptual videos in this introduction to phonetics and phonology (by conceptual, I mean the ones on topics like suprasegmental elements or consonants, not the ones on dialects of English).

Pronunciation Discussion

A lot of programs begin with having you learn the hiragana and katakana; I've asked you to begin with pronunciation instead.

I didn't personally begin Japanese like this. In fact, I didn't know any of this even existed until I was almost four years into my learning. That being said, I *did* approach Mandarin like this, and I've had notably fewer headaches with it than Japanese. It's been so helpful with Mandarin that I will personally begin any future language I ever approach from here—and I'd like to encourage you to do so, too. But why?

In four words: *The International Phonetic Alphabet*

1. For most languages there exists both a spoken language, and then also a written means to represent that spoken language.

2. Unfortunately, in most of them, there isn't a 1:1 relationship between the symbols you see and the sounds you hear. For example, English is comprised of 44 phonemes despite having only 26 letters (a phoneme is basically a unique unit of sound).

3. Nevermind what's happening within a single language, this is further complicated by the fact that different languages tend to associate different sounds with the same letters.
    a. Compare the sound of pinyin c (as in c ǎ oméi, strawberry) to its English counterparts in **c**at or dan**c**e. Same letter, different sounds.
    b. Another problem is *how many* sounds a given language associates with a given letter. English's *a* is associated with seven sounds, whereas Japanese *a* is associated with only a single sound.

4. The result of all this is that orthography—the conventions a language employs to represent how it sounds on paper—can get pretty chaotic. Here's a video that talks about why English's spelling is so crazy, to give a relatable example.

5. Out of need for consisteny, linguists created a special alphabet—the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)—as a means to standardize spelling. It's not perfect, but generally speaking, IPA letters are consistent—whether representing a sound in French, Japanese or Klingon. That means that there's no more funny business like *gh* representing one sound in *through*, another in *tough*, and still another in *taught*. Play around with some of this stuff:

    a. Visual representations of the parts of your mouth that make sound and which sounds they're associated with
    b. Lots of goodies from the IPA association—an interactive ipa chart, tons of charts

That in mind, **starting with pronunciation lets us avoid imposing English rules onto Japanese**. That saves us tons of headaches. We could really drag this out, but generally speaking:

1. The sounds that exist in English and Japanese are not the same.
    a. English has some sounds that Japanese doesn't
        i. like the r in green, /ɹ/, or the l in gleen, /l̪/
    b. Japanese has some sounds that English doesn't
        i. /h/ becomes /ç/ when preceding /i/ or /j/, and /ɸ/ before /u/
    c. Some of the sounds in English and Japanese seem similar, but that's just because of interference from English.
        i. The sh sound in she, /ʃ/ , is not the same sh sound used in Japanese, /ɕ/
    d. Some of the sounds in English and Japanese are so similar that they're considered to be the "same" sound, even from an IPA perspective, but they're actually "ornamented" slightly differently.
        i. English T/D sounds are *apical*, meaning they're made with the tip of your tongue. Japanese T/D sounds are *laminal*, meaning they're made with the blade of your tongue instead (see that visual chart if you aren't sure what the blade of your tongue is).

2. If you can't at least recognize/conceptualize the sound that a symbol (ie, hiragana/katakana) is representing, you're probably going to associate it with an incorrect sound. Generally speaking, sounds are conceptualized in three ways.
    a. Place of articulation (the only real difference between P and K is that P is made purely with your lips, K is made with your tongue/soft palate).
    b. Manner of articulation (the only real difference between P and F is how much air is blocked. With P air stops and "explodes" out, with F air is restricted but still flows out continuously).
    c. Phonation (refers to your vocal chords vibrating. The only real difference between P and B is that B is voiced and P is unvoiced)

3. Moving beyond the level of these individual sounds, we can also discuss words in terms of their suprasegmental features.
    a. English employs the suprasegmental feature *stress* - it's jaPAN, not JApan.
    b. Japanese does not use stress. Instead, it makes use of *pitch* - each mora/syllable of a word might be relatively high or low. Words have a standard pitch pattern, but this sort of goes out the window at the sentence level.
    c. Japanese has a consistent mora/syllable *length*. In English, we often maim words and blend sounds together (what are you → wha'cha; referred to as "chunking"), but this doesn't happen in Japanese. The word *kanji* isn't pronounced in two beats as *kan-ji,* but rather in three: *ka-n-ji*.

d. Like English, *Intonation* is another important part of Japanese pronunciation. Intonation refers to how your pronunciation changes in order to show emotion and with questions.
e. I compared these concepts in more detail/friendlier terms in a comment

Why should you care?

Getting a solid handle on all this stuff will help you in two main ways:

- Obviously, you can put them into practice to improve your accent
- Less obviously, understanding how Japanese puts words together (both what sounds can/can't exist and how they can/can't interact) will help you with parsing Japanese spoken at a natural speed. In other words, your listening comprehension will improve.

I recognize that this was a pretty dense section, but if you consider the fact that you're about to commit to learning

- 92 kana (46 hiragana/katakana)
- Over 2,000 kanji
- Several thousand words

I think it's worth taking a small pit stop to get your head around

- The 30 odd sounds/phonemes that exist in Japanese, many of which are shared with English
- The 3 ways that individual sounds are conceptualized
- The 4 main aspects of prosody / suprasegmental elements.

Day 2: Kana

Kana: Attaching symbols to those sounds

Now that we've learned about the sounds that exist in Japanese and how they're made, we can take the next step of learning how these sounds are represented in Japanese. Once we've gotten a solid grip on how they're represented, we can start mixing those sounds together to create words. From there we can do the same with words to create phrases, sentences, etc.

So… on the off chance that you skipped the above section, just remember: **All of the symbols you're about to learn are nothing more than representations of sounds**. Given that you're going to commit to learning 92 kana (46 hiragana/katakana), over 2,000 kanji and several thousand words, I think it's worth taking the time to make sure that you've more or less got down the sounds these symbols stand for.

After all, there only 30 odd phonemes in Japanese, and many of them are shared with English.

Anyhow, that's my soapbox.

During this section we'll cover 46 hiragana and 46 katakana; these are sort of like our alphabet (technically they're called a syllabary). Each kana is directly associated with a sound.

In the next section we'll approach kanji, the chinese characters used in Japanese. Kanji are phonosemantic, meaning they carry information about sound *and* meaning. If that raises more questions than answers, check out the sections about Logographic systems and Syllabic systems in Wikipedia's article on writing systems or this video comparing Japanese's three scripts.

Kana Homework

Unlike many of the other sections, you need to cover everything here. There aren't very many kana to learn, but since they pop up *everywhere*, you also don't need to learn them especially well (for now). Look a word up in the dictionary? Kana! Open your textbook? Kana! Glance at the subtitles? Kana! You'll naturally commit these to memory over time without much effort.

That in mind, I don't want you to spend a whole lot of time on this. Just get loosely familiar with them and then jump into the rest of the stuff—you'll reinforce the grasp you have on kana by doing literally *anything* with Japanese. At first it'll be very unwieldy and writing any kana from memory will take quite a lot of effort, but before long, it becomes as natural as writing the ABC's.

Complete Level I over the course of the next few days. Once you finish it, move onto learning Kanji. Work through Level II while you're progressing down the timeline.

Level I: Build passive recognition.
Make an account over at *Read the Kanji*, sign in and work through the hiragana / katakana. The system gradually introduces you to new characters as you master old ones and also keeps track of how often you get each one right or wrong, showing you less of what you've got down and more of what you don't. You can do as many reviews as you want in a single session, so unlike more traditional memorization tools, this allows you to cram a lot of content into a short period of time. Sit down and cruise through these over the course of a few hours.

I normally wouldn't take this sort of brute-force approach, but since you'll be seeing these things literally everywhere, I think it's better to just get through them and get started with Japanese.

If you prefer reading, check out Tofugu's Hiragana Guide.
If you prefer watching, check out JapaneseAmmo's hands-on walkthrough. (... as a music video)

Here are some cool charts, if you're a more visual person, by:
Coto Academy | u/Danilinky | u/heimsins_konungr | Tofugu Hiragana / Katakana

Level II: Practice active recall.
Download the app Drops (free on iOS/Android) and start plugging away at their units for hiragana and katakana.

There are a lot of mixed reviews for this app, and many people complain that it imposes limits on how long you can study (5 minutes per 10 hours) and also that there are better resources available to memorize vocabulary. That's all completely true, but it applies mostly to using Drops as a tool to learn *vocabulary*. We're just here for kana practice.

Here's what I think about Drops, personally:

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1. There are definitely *much* better ways to memorize vocabulary. We'll go over them. For now, though, all we care about is getting more comfortable with the hiragana/katakana, and so far as that goes, I think Drops is great.
2. Drops has very high quality audio for each hiragana/katakana. Hearing the right sound each time you see the kana (as opposed to the inaccurate one you're likely subvocalizing) is a good thing.
3. Remember that guy Hermamm Ebbinghaus I talked about in the Day 0 section, and that idea—The Serial Position Effect—that he introduced? By studying only 5 minutes in the morning and evening you give yourself a *lot* of starts and ends to study sessions. This helps you commit the kana to memory very efficiently and also prevents you from spending more time on them than you need to.

Why approach the kana with two different resources?
We'll be talking more about how memory works as we go along, but for now, I've introduced one resource that is optimized for your *short term memory* and another one that's optimized for your *long term memory*.

Short Term Memory
Read the Kanji (or any other tool you might use to cram a ton of kana in within a short period of time) is employing the rather weak encoding method of *rehearsal* to quickly create the mental space needed to process new information. This will give you what you need to start working with the kana right away, but the memories you've built are quite transient and you likely can't do much beyond recall the kana when you see them. They'll also fade away quite quickly.. But that's okay. All we're trying to do right now is get all the kana in your head so you can play with them.

It'll likely take you several hours over the course of a few days and sessions to do that.

Long Term Memory
Drops (or any other SRS tool you might be using) is taking a more spaced out and thorough approach that helps you commit the kana to memory—and keep them there. This is the reason I *don't* suggest you pay for Drops Premium, unlocking unlimited use of the app: *we aren't using Drops to cram*. That is what Read the Kanji was for. We're using Drops to efficiently and gradually reach a familiarity with the kana that will create very strong memories, help you to speed up the recall process and to write them out from memory.

It'll only take you 2-3 hours worth of 5 minute blocks over the course of a month or so.

If you really don't want to use Drops, I'd use the below anki decks instead. Do 4 cards per day.

Textfugu's Hiragana | Textfugu's Katakana | Stroke Order / Mixed

Day 7: Kanji

Kanji are a very big hurdle to overcome for all learners of Japanese, and due to the herculean nature of the task, many methods have understandably been proposed to learn them. Due to the variety of approaches available, discussions on how to learn kanji almost always seem to get very heated.

To be honest, I'm almost frightened to discuss this. Approaches to kanji are so polarized that, no matter what I might write, there are still going to be some who will criticize me.

I'd prefer to avoid as much of that as possible, so I'm going to approach this section very cautiously. It might come off as being redundantly and needlessly cautious, but I think that's necessary.

I'm going to approach this section like this:

1. I'll give you a more optimized version of what I did in the homework section.
2. I'll tell you what I actually did: what I liked, didn't like, and learned along the way.
3. I'll sum that up into my personal stances on 4 hot-button issues concerning kanji
4. I'll link to a few other resources so that you can look into other approaches, too

My goal is that, by the time you finish this section, you'll have accomplished a few things:

1. You'll understand how Kanji work
2. You'll accept that you need to learn them
3. You'll more or less have decided how you're going to conquer them
4. You'll begin following that plan to learn the kanji

A few things to keep in mind

1. You don't become Lance Armstrong or Marianne Vos just because you outgrow your training wheels. All it means is that you can clumsily ride a bike—you've still got a *long* way to go before you can ride comfortably, let alone competitively. Don't mistake your Kanji tool—whatever it is—as the end all be all. There's still a lot more Japanese to learn.

   No matter what method you decide on, it's ultimately nothing more than a pair of training wheels. The point of training wheels is to support you until you can ride your bike well enough that you no longer need them. That's it. Training wheels are *very* limited in function.

2. You're going to forget stuff. A lot of stuff. You will forget stuff no matter how seriously you take this, no matter how much you're paying attention, no matter how good your resources are, no matter how smart you are. That's okay. Forgetting information, and then recalling it, is a necessary part of convincing your brain that it's worth remembering.

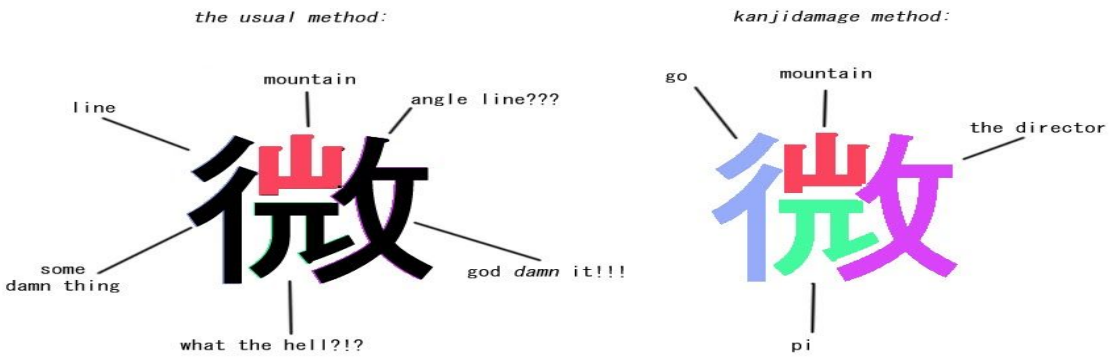
Level I: Figure out how the squiggles work

So long as you're doing something that's more involved than staring at squiggles on paper until their likeness becomes seared into your retina, any tool that you might stumble into is going to be based on the same few basic concepts.

I'd like you to spend 30 minutes or so getting familiar with these concepts so that you can make a more informed judgment about what I'm going to suggest and the alternative options I share.

1. Read through Kanji Damage's overview of how kanji work. It's a bit… coarse… but I think it does a really good job of presenting the most important information about kanji in an accessible way. If you'd like to learn even more about kanji, follow that up with the University of Chicago's *Introduction to Kanji* (history, types of kanji, stroke order, radicals).

   Here's ~~kanjidamage~~ every modern Kanji learning approach in a nutshell:



2. Wonder what *go, mountain, the director* and *pi* have to do with 微 (delicateness)? They're chunks that get used to make mneumonics to help us to memorize stuff. Here's how a guy used mnemonics to memorize Moby Dick, and if you're down to digress, Moonwalking with Einstein is a book that documents an average dude's journey from forgetting his keys to competing in memory tournaments, using these same basic ideas.

3. Spend some time learning about spaced repetition in more detail; most modern systems use an algorithm to determine when it's most efficient for you to review content.

   Here's what it is in 4 minutes and how to apply it in 8 minutes.

   If you're willing to put another hour into this, a Cambridge university med student put out two great videos on applying these concepts. Check out spaced repetition (26min) and active recall (20min). If you don't have time now, make time for these later.

Level II: Decide which route you're going to take through the kanji

While learning the kanji is actually pretty straightforward after you get into the routine, picking your resource can be difficult. Many people struggle through several tools before finding one that works for them. The result is that they end up hailing that particular tool as being "the way", and are often able to back up their statement with thorough explanations of why their tool is the best and others are lacking. When everybody supports a different tool, this gets really confusing.

Each of these tools can work for the right person, and given how different everyones' styles and situations are, I don't think I can say that one is better or worse than the others. So long as you find one that you can tolerate and consistently keep up with, you'll be fine.

Whatever you choose, you'll be investing at least a few hundred hours into this. Before you do so, please set aside a couple hours to skim through the different approaches available and decide which one seems to best suit you.

The final Anki deck I ended up committing to: All in One Kanji Deck (RTK Order)

RTK (sample available here) treats kanji as being like lego constructions: mix different legos in different ways to get different kanji. In each chapter he gives you new "blocks" and shows you what kanji/"constructions" you can make with them. Many systems employ the same strategy.

What's controversial is that Heisig feels that learning the kanji is such a monumental task that it requires your full attention: he suggests learning what ~3,000 kanji mean, and how to write them, before you begin doing *anything* in Japanese. Before even learning how to pronounce them. No vocabulary or anything, just kanji and an associated English keyword.

With heisig, you're basically attaching a bunch of fancy symbols for English words.

Other options (alphabetical order):

- Kanji Damage is another take on RTK. He ignores a lot of kanji that he feels aren't worth the time to learn (ie, characters like this one (桐) for "paulownia", a type of tree). He aims to introduce only the kanji you're practically going to need. Sort of NSFW/crude style.

  He's got several explanatory pages on his website, so go check out what he has to say.

- The Kodansha Kanji Learner's Course is popular among people who don't like RTK/Heisig. A couple core differences between the KKLC and RTK is that the KKLC system rejects Heisig's claim that it isn't helpful to learn readings/vocab alongside kanji and that it's important for learners to make their own mnemonics. All of this information is provided for you.

  Each kanji in the KKLC is introduced like this: sample page KKLC

- Mass Immersion Approach's Recognition RTK is a condensed version of RTK that goes over the 1,000 most frequently occurring kanji; these 1,000 kanji cover 90% of written Japanese. This deck is designed to get learners into Japanese as soon as possible, but you'll have to spend time filling in gaps later.

  MIA has a very thorough explanatory post on Production RTK (Heisig) vs Recognition RTK (MIA) here. If their approach sounds logical to you, check out the rest of their timeline.

- NihongoShark has been in the community for ages and this is his take on the most optimized way to learn kanji. It's a condensed version of what I presented (2,200 vs 3,000 kanji). He trimmed the deck down to include only what you need to know for the JLPT.

  He talks about what he recommends you to do and why he organized the deck like this in his post on learning the kanji—if you like his style, he offers a whole guided system.

- Read the Kanji, the resource we used earlier to learn the kana, is actually a kanji resource. It breaks the kanji up by JLPT level and allows you to cram; unlike the kana, each kanji comes with an example sentence. There is/was a pretty active community that comments on each sentence/kanji, too. This system doesn't break down the kanji for you, though.

  If you've been following this guide then you should already have an opinion about Read the Kanji. If you like it and don't mind breaking the kanji down yourself, feel free.

- WaniKani holds your hand the whole way. You *have* to follow their program, but they've organized everything for you, so all you've really got to do is log in every day and do what they tell you. You'll learn ~2,000 kanji and ~6,000 vocab using those kanji, supposedly in about a year (but probably closer to two).

  Here's a really long reflection by someone who finished Wani Kani: 368 Days of WK

Here is someone else's take on many of the above resources, plus a few more.

Whatever you ultimately choose to do, just remember, these are your training wheels. Whether you know only the rough shape of the characters after finishing your tool or you know how to pronounce a few vocab words using them, whether you can or can't write them from memory, whether you learn all the JLPT kanji or only a segment of them, you won't be done with kanji.

I talked about just how limited I think this first pass through RTK is in another post, and I feel that this applies to any method you might use. Getting through the kanji is just step one.

In my opinion, this step is all about getting comfortable with / getting over a fear of kanji so that the rest of your journey through Japanese becomes smoother.

Level III: Start Learning the Kanji

If you've chosen to use another deck, you should be following their system for the rest of this section. I encourage you to do so. If not, this is how I would re-approach the deck that I used.

Learning to recognize

1. First, take 10 minutes to review what kanji are and how their stroke order works.
2. Figure out how Anki works (less detail/more detail). I use these addons/modifiers, too.
3. Go download this deck that follows Heisig's RTK.
4. In Anki, go to browser > search by card type > "card:Recall" > suspend all of the recall cards. This isn't about being thorough, it's about achieving a *minimum marketable product*. I do this to get into content asap, and *then* spread out the process of learning to write the kanji.
5. Set "new" to 5 per day. Do 5 cards every day and you'll finish in about 2 years **(see below)**.
6. Download the associated radicals deck (what radicals are for) and work through them as they become necessary for the kanji you're learning with the above deck.
   (If you'd prefer to use the physical RTK book, you don't need to do this).
7. The deck I've suggested includes a lot of information about each kanji, including vocab words that include it. If there aren't any vocab words, or none of them seem useful to you, search the kanji in a dictionary and pick a few vocab words that you think are better.

   (You don't have to try to memorize any of that stuff; just have them there so that you see them when you do your reviews. I think that step one is just knowing what exists.)

8. ***I get it, 5 cards isn't very much. You're excited about this (after all, you've put up with me for 30 pages already)—but trust me. The difference between starting with 5 cards or 20 only amounts to *one month* over the course of 3,000 cards. One month isn't a long time to wait for stability and insurance from burnout. Let's do the math.

Week • Pace	W2	W4	W6	W8	W10	Day 150	D182
@20/day	280	560	840	1,120	1400	3,000	---
@5/day	70	---	---	---	---	---	---
@8/day	---	182	---	---	---	---	---
@11/day	---	---	336	---	---	---	---
@14/day	---	---	---	532	---	---	---
@17/day	---	---	---	---	770	---	---
@20/day	---	---	---	---	---	2370	3,000

Conveniently, the grammar section will take just about 6 months.

Learning to write (how I approach this)

9. I take a bit of an unconventional approach to learning to write kanji and I discuss this in the section *Kanji: Discussion*. I made a comment discussing how I do so, and we'll begin that at around the six month mark. Again, feel free to take a different approach.

10. We'll begin making the monolingual transition at around the 9 month mark. If you choose to keep following my advice, at that point you'll start writing down words and their Japanese definition down as you stumble across stuff while reading. This enables you to gradually commit characters to memory while working through stuff that's important to you; nothing arbitrary or mind-numbing.

Kanji: What I actually did

Unless we're talking about stubbornness and inefficiency, I don't think I'm particularly special. In this section I'll walk you through my relationship with kanji. Hopefully it'll give you some ideas about what to expect, help you discard a few bad ideas and, ultimately, save you some time.

Here are the TL;DR points:

- You *can* get through all of RTK in a few months if you really want to. I did.
- It took only six months of no-Japanese for me to forget most of RTK, afterwards.
- You're better off sticking to and finishing one resource than bouncing around.
- Learning all 3,007 kanji from RTK is not necessary. Getting through the JLPT kanji is enough to get started reading; realistically, you don't even need all of the JLPT kanji (*cough* 麿/朕)
- Flashcards are *excellent* in the beginning but come with diminishing returns. Know where your line is and don't feel bad about moving on from Anki once you reach it.
- You don't need to know nearly as many kanji as you might think to begin reading
- Reading comes with many wonderful benefits—kanji practice included.
- I'm now reading my second book in Mandarin but haven't intentionally studied any hanzi. I knew enough kanji that I have been able to learn the hanzi I didn't know via exposure. There is a point where you can begin focusing on organic learning, moving mostly away from Anki, reserving it only for the things you think are particularly important.

August 2014: Clueless

I first arrived to Japan in August 2014 and was immediately put off by kanji—*umm, maybe I'll just learn to speak Japanese? Isn't 46 hiragana and katakana enough?* More than anything, they just seemed incredibly redundant to me. Writing out the word for *to go* in hiragana takes three strokes: いく. Writing it out in kanji takes seven: 行く. Why double the necessary amount of strokes?

I did my best to ignore kanji at first: I learned the ones I needed for class and nothing else. To prepare for kanji tests I'd open the back of my genki book and write out each kanji with its readings (no vocab included) fifteen times.

Needless to say, I very quickly learned to hate kanji.

December 2014: Introduced to RTK

One day I was sitting in the library, preparing for my final test, when a much more advanced friend (six? seven? Semesters ahead of me) walked by to ask how it was going. I took the opportunity to voice my Kanji woes; his jaw went slack and his heart dropped so far that I heard it bounce off the floor. *Dude*, he said, *Please tell me you're joking. Are you really doing that?*

I wasn't joking.

My friend introduced me to RTK and suggested that I do 10 kanji per day. He spent the next week

walking me through the method, insisted that I had to follow Heisig's instructions to the letter and let me borrow his Amazon JP account to purchase the book. I wasn't completely sold but decided that anything would be better than what I had been doing; I'd begin after finals.

January 2015: Cue hundreds of hours of RTK

I'm slightly embarrassed to say that RTK was one of the most thrilling rides I've ever taken. I had originally intended to stick to 10 per day, as my friend had suggested, but ended up doing 15 in my first session (finishing chapter one). Within a week I was doing 50 per day, within two I was spending nearly five hours on kanji per day. Not speaking much Japanese, my newfound recognition of kanji meant independence. I could make sense of signs around me, generally understand what I was eating, follow news headlines in Japanese as they came up on TV.

I had followed Heisig's instructions nearly to the letter: 3,000 hand-made flashcards (see page 43/45). I even gathered 9 shoeboxes and made a physical spaced repetition system to determine what cards I should be reviewing and when. I reviewed only keyword to kanji, and although Heisig said not to, I liked kanji so much that I wrote each kanji from memory with every review. I handwrote ~1,000 kanji (not necessarily unique ones) each day for three months.

April 2015: Conquered RTK (or so I thought)

If I felt free before, I felt like Superman now. I recognized practically every kanji I saw, and if I happened to see a new one, I could memorize it in less than a second. One day I went to the hospital with a friend who nearly broke her ankle dancing; I understood what was written on the intake forms at the hospital, she didn't. She was a full time student at our university and was doing her coursework fully in Japanese; I was thinking about taking the N5. RTK was wild, man.

This all got to my head (if you can't tell) and I actually dropped out of my Japanese class. I worked through Genki II by myself, continued practicing kanji, then went home in July.

July-Dec 2015: No Japanese

I returned to my home university and we had no Japanese courses. I intended to study by myself but didn't get around to it. I had zero contact with Japanese in any form during this time.

Jan 2016: Started WaniKani

The study abroad advisor sent me an email saying that a few Japanese students would come to study at our university and it'd be great if I could help out. Part of that included writing welcome letters in Japanese to include in their goodie bags. To my surprise, half a year was all it had taken to forget the kanji. Given that all I knew about them in the first place was what they looked like and an English definition, admittedly, there hadn't really been much to forget.

I decided to follow WaniKani because I wanted to try a more guided approach to the kanji, and WK also taught two or three vocab words alongside every one.

July 2016: Stopped WaniKani
I left the US for Japan again and volunteered during the summer; no reliable internet access meant no WK. I'd gone much slower, due to WK's pacing, and learned vocab words for ~600 kanji over the course of the spring semester. I didn't re-learn to write, but I felt good about WK.

Oct 2016: Graded Readers
The semester began at my 2nd Japanese university, I took a placement test and the results confused my teachers. My score on the vocab test suggested that I go into class level 5 of 7; N3, preparing for N2. My reading/listening/grammar/vocab scores suggested I go into level 2 or 3, N5/N4 courses.

It turned out that while I had forgotten how to write characters from memory, I still recognized many characters. I recalled the meaning to enough of these characters that I tested above my level. I ended up being placed in level 4, was directed to a stack of White Rabbit graded readers and told to read as much as I could. Hopefully my confidence with kanji could support my other skills.

Naturally a reader, I really liked this approach. I read all of the White Rabbit graded readers (N5 through N2) in addition to both of the Read Real Japanese books: Essays and Fiction

Feb 2017: The First Book
I spread out the graded readers so that I'd finish them by the end of the semester. Upon finishing I began reading Black Fairy Tale by Otsuichi, keeping track of the new words I felt were important enough to write down. By the end of the book I had over 500. Slow and painstaking, but satisfying. (Already linked, but I kept track of everything I read and wrote a post about it).

From this point on, I have basically just read books.

September 2017: Re-learning to write the kanji
I went to Russia to teach English for a year after graduating, spending ~3 hours a day in a train. Having already done RTK once and having done ⅓ of WaniKani, I proceeded to spend ~250 hours over the course of another year working through RTK *again*. I don't think it was very useful.

September 2018: Onto Mandarin
I severely limited my use of Anki for Japanese so that I'd have more time to focus on Mandarin (and for my own sanity). Now I read in Japanese on the way to work, have changed how I practice kanji and work through a JLPT prep book after arriving to work. I find this to be much more sustainable.

Dec 2019: In Reflection
I've spent nearly 1,000 hours on kanji over the last 5 years and that was complete overkill. I have to read a lot of scribbled Mandarin for my current job, so it hasn't been a total waste, but I think I'd be further along with Japanese if I'd spent 700 of those hours doing literally *anything* else.

Many arguments over how to best learn kanji seem to boil down to a few points:

1. Should you, or should you not, learn to write kanji by hand? If so, how?
2. Should you, or should you not, learn readings as you go? If so, how?
3. Should you focus on kanji, or focus on learning vocab alongside the kanji?
4. Should you learn kanji at once, before other studies, or as you go?

I'd like to share my opinion on these points so that you can better understand why I suggest approaching the characters as I have. Spending some time to figure out where you personally stand on each one will help you choose a kanji resource that better aligns with your values.

On Learning to Handwrite Kanji

Learn to write the kanji, but spread the burden of doing so out over time. Over a long time.

Knowing how to write kanji has been incredibly useful for me and I regret zero seconds of the time I spent learning to do so. To be honest, I enjoyed it. That being said, if I had to do it again, I don't think I'd put so much effort into learning to write them right away. Here's why:

1. The method that most ardently promotes learning to write the kanji by hand (ie, the one I followed) was first published in 1977. Smart phones didn't exist then. There was no convenient way to look up a kanji you were shaky on or didn't recognize, and if you didn't recognize a kanji, how could you look up an unknown word using that kanji? The answer is *slowly*. Getting all the characters down pat before really beginning to engage with Japanese would have saved you some massive headaches in 1977. It's 2020 now. We have cellphones.

2. There's a phenomenon called Character Amnesia, first documented in Japan in the 80's, in which native speakers have been becoming increasingly less able to handwrite characters. There's even an idiom for it in Mandarin: 提筆忘字 (loosely speaking: lift pen, forget character). I've personally lived in both Japan and Taiwan and assure you that you could very easily get around without knowing how to write characters from memory—there are very few real-world situations where you couldn't just quickly look them up on your phone.

The can of worms I'm hesitating to open here is that, in our ever digitizing world, the ability to handwrite characters just might be less relevant and important than it was at the time the guy who wrote that book wrote it, as much as I love him and his book.

I think it's more practical to reach a point where you can recognize them quickly and then spread out the burden of learning to write them over time.

On Learning Readings with the Kanji

Learn readings via vocab, not via kanji. Whether you learn kanji first and vocab later or learn both at the same time is up to you. Just make sure you aren't attaching arbitrary readings to isolated kanji.

The Japanese system of kanji pronunciation is incredibly convoluted. Almost all kanji have more than one reading and many kanji have several. 生 has like 12 readings, for example, and just look at 日曜日 (**nichi**you**bi**). The same kanji (日), within the same word, gets read in two different ways. On top of that, it still has 3 other ways that it could be pronounced. Even if you were to have memorized all of these readings, you wouldn't really know which one to use when.

This mayhem is partly due to the fact that Japanese people didn't invent kanji—they took them from China and imposed them upon the Japanese language. This lead to a few issues:

- In addition to whatever [Chinese] word the character originally belonged to, Japanese often also had its own equivalent word. Both got kept. This led to a necessity of having two reading systems, one [Chinese] and one Japanese, the On'Yomi and Kun'Yomi.

  As a rule of thumb:
  If you see kanji and hiragana together, you'll use kun'yomi.
  If you see multiple kanji stuck together, you'll use on'yomi... *But:*

- While Japanese borrowed kanji from Chinese, *Chinese* isn't a language. It's an entire language family: there are tons of Chinese languages. Mandarin is currently deemed to be the standard one, but this wasn't always the case. Japanese had been borrowing kanji from China and tacking them onto Japanese words over a long period of time, and this led to borrowing readings from multiple different Chinese languages. There are actually multiple different categories of on'yomi.

Here's a much more eloquently put explanation about that: *how Japan overloaded Chinese characters* (6min) by NativLang, a linguist on YouTube.

- See sljfaq, imabi (part II) and Tofugu and Wikipedia for more on the history of Kanji

On Learning Kanji and Vocab

Make your own decision about this. It doesn't really matter in the end.

There are two main stances on this issue that tend to go back and forth:

1. We need to take in a lot of new information—the sounds of Japanese, the kana they're associated with, Japanese words, and the kanji associated with those words. That's too much to do at once. We should simplify the process by dividing and conquering.

2. We're trying to learn Japanese, not fancy symbols for English words. It's inefficient to learn a kanji without a vocab word to go alongside it. Furthermore, it's practically useless to learn a kanji that you may never, ever use (there are a lot of kanji for specific types of trees and stuff like that). We should ensure that all of our learning is practical.

I think both of these positions have valid points that can be demonstrated by literally just looking at random words. Here's one that means clear/obvious: 明白 (めいはく).

1. If you were to follow approach #1 (the RTK approach), you'd see this and think "bright + white", but that doesn't really help you to understand what this means. It makes some sense after you see the translation, but you'll be thrown off until you look it up. This sort of thing happens quite often. Several of RTK's keywords don't end up being super practical beyond making mnemonics. There's a lot left to do after finishing RTK, to put it mildly.

2. If you were to follow approach #2 (most other approaches) and make a point of learning vocab alongside each kanji, this word would probably look like a great candidate! Being able to say that something is clear or obvious is important. *But* there are more common ways to express this in Japanese. It'd sound sort of weird if you suddenly dropped this word in conversation. Unfortunately, you can't really know that until you start consuming media or engaging with Japanese people. I *do* think this helps to learn the readings, but this method isn't foolproof, either. There's still work to do after finishing the kanji.

In a nutshell:

- Approach #1 will get you through the kanji faster but leave you with a lot of backtracking.
- Approach #2 will take a bit more time but also take you further along the kanji journey.
- Whichever approach you use, you're going to have to spend a lot of time consolidating a dictionary when you begin reading. The endgame of both methods is, essentially, a different starting point for your ability to engage with written Japanese in any meaningful capacity.

To be honest, I think the most important criteria in determining your ideal method is (a) patience and (b) tolerance for ambiguity.

- If you don't mind having to (constantly) check a dictionary when you begin reading, RTK will allow you to get into Japanese content more quickly than approach #2.
- If you want to have a smoother transition into native materials—you know, so you can enjoy them—any of the other approaches I've shared will better prepare you to do so.

You know yourself. As Steve Kaufman says, pick your own solution.

On when to learn the kanji

RTK suggests working through all of the kanji before you do anything else in Japanese; lots of people think that is a ridiculous suggestion. I agree. Sort of.

- Approaching Japanese without having to worry about the kanji will give you a huge leg up with your learning. It makes literally *everything* easier, I dare say incomparably so.
- A lot of kanji, even the "everyday use" characters, don't really show up all that often. If you get through 3,000 kanji before you crack open your first textbook, you'll be sitting on a ton of very advanced kanji that you won't see for years, if ever. You'll forget them and just end up having to re-learn them again later on, effectively wasting your time both now *and* later.

TL;DR

After spending way too much time trying way too many approaches, my opinion is that kanji should be approached as part of a routine, worked through in small doses every day, and you're better off sticking to your method (great or not) than jumping ship a few times. *So choose your method wisely.*

The only exception I would make is to say that particularly dedicated learners (those willing to put several hours a day into this over the course of a few months) might find it worthwhile to power through a core base of the most common kanji. After getting through this base, I would still tone things down and focus on sustainability and consistency. Language is a marathon, not a sprint.

Finishing any of these kanji methods brings you to a position that I think is comparable to that of an English speaker beginning to learn a romance language, just *much* more watered down.

- You're still at zero, in that you don't understand the language, but now you're at an optimistic zero. Japanese looks familiar to you, whereas before it was squiggly lines. In other words, after hundreds of hours of kanji, you approach a French learner's day zero. Sort of.
    - Just as an English speaker could guess the meaning of *organización* or *fenomenal,* you can occasionally recognize words on sight, like 消火器 (fire/put out/utensil=fire extinguisher) or 赤血球 (red/blood/ball=red blood cell)
    - Just like an English speaker's pattern recognition occasionally leads them astray, as with *embarazada* meaning pregnant, not embarrassed, you'll also see words like 大家 (big + house) and come up with something that doesn't mean *landlord*.
    - More often than not, you'll have to look up words even if the kanji make sense.

The silver lining is that Japanese front-loads the vocabulary burden whereas English back-loads it. After 5 years I rarely see a kanji I don't know, a fact that makes remembering new vocab very easy. I can't say the same for English, even though it's my native language.

Day 14: Grammar

You're probably here before day 14. That's ok. As we go on you'll stumble into a wider variety of problems, you'll find more and more cool resources, you'll get a better idea about what you want out of Japanese, better understand your values and your strengths/weaknesses will become more noticeable. In other words, it will become more and more difficult to assess how long any given task will take you to finish. I'd rather leave you with breathing room than without it.

I decided that I wanted to give you a full week between the last stage and this one so that you'd have time to explore the wide variety of kanji resources/approaches available, get the kana down pat and accidently get sidetracked on YouTube and completely skip studying at least once. You're about to make another *huge* commitment and I want to make sure that you are standing on firm ground when you make it.

If you're here way before day 14, just remember that you don't need to rush through this. If you take the time to establish a routine that you enjoy and believe is getting you somewhere, you'll be more likely to stick with it. If you stick with it, you'll be in a really solid spot next year. Probably not fluent, but you'll have a respectable amount of Japanese under you that will enable you to start getting personal with the language—engaging with it not as a student but in ways that you personally find fulfilling.

Grammar Discussion: What's a forest and why are we spending so much time here?

Before we begin talking about *Japanese* grammar, I want to take a page to think about learning grammar in general. It never goes away, so let's avoid making trouble that isn't necessary.

On consuming information in general
There's a really cool book called *How to Read a Book* that offers a few obvious, but important, ideas.

- *Catching a ball is as much an [active] activity as pitching or hitting it [is].* → Whenever you consume new information, you should be trying to categorize it, figuring out how it relates to what you already know. Reading/studying is an *active* activity.
- *The art of catching is the skill of catching every kind of pitch — fastballs and curves, changeups and knucklers.* → Not all materials are equally relevant/important to us at a given time. Understand what you want to get out of a material and approach it accordingly.
- *Writers vary, just as pitchers do. Some writers have excellent "control"; they know exactly what they want to convey, and they convey it precisely and accurately*. [*Others don't*].→ No resource or tutor is perfect; you're going to need to put in a bit of effort meeting them halfway.
- *Reading is a complex activity, just as writing is. It consists of a large number of separate acts, all of which must be performed in a good reading*. *The person who can perform more of them is better able to read*. → Sound familiar? Kolb's stages of development. It's everywhere.

On the necessity of "multiple passes"
Anyhow, what I really want to say is that you should expect to have to approach the same grammar points multiple times and from a variety of angles before they really sink in. Consider this:

> *...Like a cubist painting (II), whose various elements are related simply by contiguity, novels like Ulysses or The Sound and the Fury can be understood only when they are perceived 'all at once,' for the various elements unfold not chronologically but in a fashion that seems at first to be almost random.*
>
> *It is often said that you cannot read such novels for the first time unless you have already read them. In other words, you must have their facts and their stories in your head (as you would when looking at a painting) before you can understand them as their narratives unfold.*
> ~ *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction* by Michael J. Hoffman & Patrick D. Murphy

I think that the same thing can be said about learning grammar: *You can't learn a bit of grammar for the first time unless you already know it.* As I said in the beginning of this document, I think that the mustard seed anecdote is a great way to think about learning. If you've never seen a grammar point before, its basic function is going to be more important to you than its nuance. As you get a better

grasp on that grammar point and many others, it becomes easier to appreciate the fine details. I think that this process looks something like this:

1. *There is a building and it appears to have four floors. I have located the front door.*
   On the first pass we are just seeing what exists; what is and isn't possible. You aren't worrying about committing it to memory, let alone mastering it. All we're concerned about is becoming very loosely aware of the corral that we've got to run around in.

2. *If I get hungry, there's a ramen shop located on floor two. "Give me a ramen, please."*
   Over the course of the next few passes we begin accumulating key structures and "go-to" patterns that we can repurpose for ourselves. We aren't very concerned about all the little details yet; we're just picking up some conversational connectors and key structures that enable us to communicate. Speech is possible at this stage, but stilted and formulaic.

   Hungry? Ramen, floor two. Thirsty? Cafe, floor three. Bathroom? Floor one. Bed? Floor four.

3. *What kind of ramen? Shio, tonkotsu, shoyu, miso…. Maybe a tsukemen? Sky's the limit.*
   Eventually you'll reach a point where you have a means to express whatever's on your mind, however choppy or roundabout it might be. From there, you'll become interested in variations of these common structures for nuance and also begin splicing together multiple simple sentences into one more complex sentence. It helps to know how and when to do so.

   I think this is a process that will come naturally after getting lots of input. At first you'll be content knowing that ～が早いか and ～や否や both mean "almost immediately upon/after ～", which is true, but eventually you'll find yourself curious as to why the hell there are two structures for seemingly the same thing. Does the JLPT exist just to torment poor learners? Boom, suddenly grammar resources have become useful and you've joined the dark side.

4. *Pescatarians can't eat ramen because the broth is pork based, even if there's no meat chunks.*
   People don't like grammar because there are a lot of seemingly dumb rules to be memorized: why do intransitive verbs take が, not を? Well, knowing a bit about transitivity, direct objects and agents helps make sense of that, but alone doesn't teach you Japanese.

   Just like with the above step, I think there's also a point in which you'll begin seeing value in learning about not only Japanese linguistics/grammar but also grammar/linguistic concepts in general. It can be really useful to have an outside frame of reference on Japanese. What's important is that *you* see a need to do this. We've got Google, so there is zero point in having knowledge just for the sake of it. If you don't see a point in doing so, don't learn it right now.

As you work through Genki, and as you get further along down the road, remember which "pass" you're on and think about what sort of info seems valuable. What does will change over time.
You don't need to learn every little thing at once. It's great to know that one use of を is to mark the accusative case, but it's probably more useful to know that you tack it onto the food you want to eat.

I'm one of those weird people who loves grammar. To me, grammar is a means of self-expression… and interesting. Grammar is the stuff that allows you to show other people what's going on in your head. It's what allows you to talk and communicate—and as you can see, I clearly like to talk. A lot.

Having said that, I'll also be the first to admit that it's easy to waste time going down a rabbit hole. Furthermore, no matter how well you prepare, your first conversations are going to be sort of rough. Everybody has heard of *that guy* who passed the N1 but can't hold a conversation.

I don't want you to be that guy. To speak well, you need to speak—but before you can speak, you need to have some sort of grounding in the language. It doesn't have to be an incredibly firm grounding, but you've got to have *something* to stand on. Mustard seeds and stuff.

Level I and II: Grammar-centered, consumption hopeful

I believe that languages should be lived, so the "mandatory" section of this guide contains only the bare minimum that I think you'll need to stumble through native content. I don't mean to say that you'll now be able to understand that content (you probably won't), but rather that you'll have learned enough to figure out why you don't understand. If you can figure out why you don't understand something, you can Google around to resolve your issue. In other words, you'll have become self-sufficient. So long as you continue enjoying yourself in Japanese, whether or not you're seriously studying, you'll improve. That's a cool place to be, and it's closer than you think.

These stages are all about finding your shoes. Once you do so, you can run away if you want.

Level III, IV, V and VI : Consumption-centered, routine grammar refinements

Now, I think that input and grammar have a sort of cyclical relationship. You learn grammar so you can consume stuff, you consume stuff and get a feel for lots of grammar points by osmosis. Eventually it becomes useful to backtrack through the fuzz and feeling to check a grammar resource; you'll figure out some nuance and it's a super cool *aha!* moment. Then you go back to input with more precision, depth and ease of understanding than you had before. And so forth.

What's important to me is that, at this stage, the grammar resources are no longer a meaty daily task—they're a quick warmup that you *check in* with. At this point most of your time should be going into input and immersion; the resources I talk about in level IV-VI are part of a process of gradually honing your comprehension. You can only cram so much into your head at once, so for the sake of efficiency and sanity, I think this should be stretched out over a longer period of time.

Those stages are about revision, routine and exploration. They'll become increasingly personal.

Level I: There's a forest. It's leaves are, to the best of my understandably shaky knowledge, green. Or maybe they're blue.

Japanese is considered to be one of the most difficult languages for English speakers to learn, and after five years and four languages, I think this difficulty comes down to familiarity—or rather, an *utter lack* of familiarity. (Don't be discouraged by this—I actually had a much less painful experience with Japanese than Spanish because I had more motivation and better resources. Difficulty is very subjective.)

While I've personally enjoyed it more, Japanese has taken *much* more work than Spanish. This is because there are tons of parallels that you can immediately draw upon when you learn a language that's close to your native one. Consider the following sentences:

1. I want to go to the sea today because the weather is nice.
2. Quiero ir al mar hoy porque el tiempo es estupendo.
3. 今日は天気がいいから、海に行きたいです。

The English and Spanish sentences line up nearly perfectly, and this is a huge advantage. The English and Japanese lines, on the other hand, don't match at all.

- It's easy to draw parallels between English and Spanish content when you're consuming, from structures to vocab, enabling you to learn a ton of stuff sheerly by osmosis. See it, recognize it, start using it. Very little conscious effort is required.
- If you aren't sure how to express something in Spanish when speaking, you can nearly always just translate word-for-word from English. Even if it isn't the most natural sentence, it will almost definitely be intelligible. That doesn't work in Japanese.
- You aren't really beginning from zero when you're learning a language that's close to your native one. You've got similar looking legos and they're more or less in the right place already. When you learn Japanese, you've got to cast all your linguistic legos, print them, then re-draw the blueprints for whatever it is that you want to build.

That in mind, I'd like you to spend an hour or so taking a survey of Japanese as a whole before we get into grammar. I want you to understand the major differences between Japanese and English and, generally, to understand what you're getting into. I think that understanding this will help you to avoid frustration when you get stuck and also to better diagnose problems you run into later on.

P.S. I also speak Spanish. I've talked at a bit more length on my experience learning to read in Spanish vs Japanese in another comment. If you're curious about the role that positive language transfer plays in learning, or just aren't sold on it, please also see that comment.

Please work through the following before moving onto level II:

1. 80/20 Japanese: Check out the graphics comparing English and Japanese word order. You can read the whole thing if you want, but if not, ctrl+f and read the following sections *Defining Different Roles, Defining roles in English,* and *Defining roles in Japanese.*
2. Imabi: Notice how all bubbles in the above graphic are all around the central "English" bubble but mostly left of the central "Japanese" bubble? Read the sections on *Left-Branching, Basic Word Order, Omission,* and *Agglutination*.
3. Smile Nihongo: Imabi is great, but it can be dense. Read this much more accessible article on sentence order that comes with nice visuals. If you're sick of reading, you can watch this (sort of corny) video instead.
4. Japanese Professor: You've now covered some of the major things you'll need to get your head around. Now that you're familiar with them, read this article that nicely sums everything up.

5. JapanesePod 101: If you're feeling adventurous, skim through some of these sentence structure comparisons. You don't need to really understand everything that's going on - just look at the romanizations and compare where parts of the sentence are.

I want you to begin like this because, as you're learning, some things aren't going to be clear. In other cases the examples in your textbook will be clear, but you won't feel like they're thorough enough: *Yeah, ok I get that it works like X, but does this structure also work like Y and Z ?* — questions for which there won't be a clarification. You'll have to seek clarification on your own.

There are going to be times where you feel dumb because seemingly simple stuff doesn't stick (I got hung up for more than an hour on the fourth lesson in Genki, a lesson that basically teaches you how to use 's (apostrophe s / possessive case) in Japanese).

You aren't dumb. This isn't only you; it's everyone. It's okay to feel frustrated. Japanese is hard.

It's a very logical language, but unfortunately, it wasn't built on the sort of logic you're used to working with. You'll have to figure out all this stuff from zero, and from time to time, that's going to make you feel like a baby. But it'll get easier as you go.

When you're ready, move onto Level II. It's time to begin with Japanese grammar.

Level II: Starting to see the forest for the trees (at least, they look like trees)

You might have caught onto this by now, but I'm big on starting small and building a routine. If you improve 1% each day for a year, you'll end up 37% better off than you are right now. As James Clear, the author of Atomic Habits says, success is the product of daily habits, not once-in-a-lifetime transformations. You'll finish Genki (or whatever textbook you use) eventually, and if we can physically carve a space out for it in your life, we can then fill that space back in with whatever it is you decide to do after Genki. And so forth. Eventually you'll put together a well-tailored routine such that, so long as you wake up, you'll be improving in Japanese.

I get that this is exciting and you want to dive into Japanese, but take a breather for a second. There are only 137 sections in all of Genki I and Genki II. Do one per weekday and you'll be done in about 6 months. That's what most Japanese university courses accomplish in 3-4 semesters.

Humor me and take six months to get through Genki. Doing so gives us the time to get through the first pass of kanji and almost all the way through the 2,000 most frequently occurring vocab words. That gives you all you need to start stumbling through native content—not too shabby, right?

1. Purchase your textbooks. I assume you'll be using the following:
   Genki I: Textbook / Workbook | Genki II: Textbook / Workbook

   If you're not in a position to buy the books, try out these free resources:
   Tae Kim | Imabi | (*I will update this with helpful alternatives; PM me).*

   → I don't expect you to take notes, but if you want to, here's how I do it.

2. Work through one single section per day. To be clear, I mean that I want you to do *numbers* today, *time* tomorrow and *telephone numbers* the day after that. Etc. It might help to watch the content being presented or check out different explanations (I / II / III / etc)

3. Complete workbook sections on a one week delay. To be clear, I mean to say that you won't touch the workbook for week one. After week one, you'll begin completing the workbook sections one week after you've completed the corresponding textbook section.

   I want you to do this to take advantage of the forgetting curve and serial-position effect that we talked about on Day 0. Waiting a week will force you to struggle a bit recalling the information which will help you to build stronger memories.

4. Take Saturday and Sunday off. Put the time you would have spent on Genki doing anything else related to Japanese. Explore YouTube or something. Building a backlist of content to immerse in now will make your life easier when we start focusing on input.

Level III: I swear to the melon-pan sama that there were trees here...

If you're reading this now, you've likely just finished Genki II. Congrats!

I also have a sneaking suspicion that if you were to look at that Genki syllabus again, you'd probably feel slightly disheartened by how much of it you don't feel confident about. Maybe you're shaky on a few sentence constructions, or maybe the concept of transitive/intransitive verbs went straight over your head. That's okay. I forgot, too. That's why we have Level III. This is the place where we figure out where the gaps are and fill them in.

This looks like a lot of stuff, and it will take ~5 months, but it should *not* be time consuming. It should only take 10-20 minutes to finish each day's tasks, so it's easy to squeeze in somewhere.

1. Read this post on habit triggers by James Clear and Trigger-Action Plans by Less Wrong.

   One of my big goals is that, by the time you've worked through this book, Japanese will have come to have a tangible and undeniable place in your everyday life. I think that the easiest way to do this is to piggy-back Japanese onto unavoidable parts of your schedule. Figure out a place you can reliably shoehorn Japanese into your day.

2. Pick up Shin Kanzen Master's N4 Grammar review book. This book is broken into 58 topical two-page units that you'll progress through at a pace of one per day. The left page has grammatical explanations/sample sentences, the right page has practice questions. There is a review test every 5 units—skip these for now, start working through them once you finish the book. Again with the forgetting curve stuff.

3. Once you finish, pick up Shin Kanzen Master's N4 Reading Comprehension book. My personal opinion is that *this* is the book all of your studies have been leading up to. This book will test if you're actually comfortable enough with the Genki grammar to make sense of Japanese text—again, do one per day.

4. Once you finish, try taking a JLPT N4 mock test. See how you do. I personally never bothered with the JLPT, and don't necessarily expect you to, but hey, milestones.

You've now got a pretty solid foundation—enough that you can start working through stuff independently. Give *Input - Level I* a shot. If it's too difficult, or you're just a person who likes structure / doesn't mind textbooks, come back for *Grammar - Level IV*.

P.S. - I think that you'll get the N5 content down just by working through Genki and beginning to consume content, but if you don't feel prepared for N4, start with Tankobon's N5/N4 prep book to make sure you've got all your bases covered and then ease into the SKM N4 books afterwards.

Level IV: Golly gee, there are bushes amongst the trees!

Do not begin this section until you've spent a bit of time in the *input* section. You might be surprised what you can pick up by immersion, so spend a bit of time inadvertently floating around and see what turns up before coming back to this more structured and intentional learning. You can probably pick up a lot of this stuff for free by doing so, so why work harder than you need to?

I personally stopped almost all structured learning after Genki II and began reading stuff. I began working through JLPT prep books after reading Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World, my second book by Murakami Haruki, and discovered that I had become familiar with all of the grammar in Shinkanzen Master's N3/N2 books and about half of what was in the N1 book just by reading and looking up stuff as a I went over the course of a few dozen books.

But… If you *really* like the structure, here are a few textbooks options:

Post Genki II, the more conventional route:

1. An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese, popularly dubbed as "Genki III"
2. After Genki III, start working through Tobira: Gateway to Advanced Japanese

The books I personally used after Genki II (curriculum at my Japanese University)

1. J Bridge to Intermediate Japanese
2. Chuukyuu wo Manabou 56
3. Chuukyuu wo Manabou 83 (can't find link?)

(*Again, I didn't really follow textbooks after Genki, so I'm not sure what to recommend. I'll continue to update this as people PM me their recommendations*).

Do the same as you did with Genki; work through one grammar point per day, be consistent.

Level V: Having emerged from a wall of bushes, I found even more trees

This is like Level III, but for levels N3/N2/N1. A few things:

- Referring back to the "**Multiple Passes**" concept from the discussion, I think this type of stuff is most efficient for finding and filling in gaps. I worked through the below resources *after* encountering them in textbooks/the wild and *after* I already had an idea of how they were used. This stage is about consolidating knowledge and comparing similar grammar.
- Referring back to the "**forgetting curve**" from Day 0, this is not content you should binge or cram. You'll learn most efficiently if you do a bit, consistently, each day.
- Referring back to "**action triggers**" from Level 3, I think it's easiest to be consistent with these studies if you tie them into another thing you do each day. I personally treat them as a warmup; it takes me **~10 minutes per day** to do, and I do it first thing after getting to work.
- It took me **about a year** to work through a grammar workbook/reading comprehension workbook for N3, N2 and N1. I've started again, from N5, because I *still* find stuff to learn.

So, continuing where you left off with N4:

1. I made a comment detailing workbooks I've used from several different brands. If you don't already have a series, click through it and pick the one that looks best to you.
2. Start with an N3 grammar workbook
3. Move onto an N3 reading comprehension book upon finishing
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 for N2/N1
5. If you feel like you did really poorly, or are running into all sorts of new information, work through another book for your JLPT level from a different brand before going up a level.

If you plan on using Shin Kanzen Master for grammar, I'd like to say:

1. I think these books are better used for reference than review. They give a lot of information, and it's good information, but it's also organized by topic. You'll see several grammar points that mean the same thing, just with a slightly different nuance. This is *excellent* for comparison, but I don't think it's a very good first-resource. Unless you've already got a strong grasp on the grammar points, I don't think it's very conducive to reviewing.
2. Because it's so thorough, I've got a special routine that I use specifically for the SKM grammar books. You don't have to follow it if you don't want to, but please skim through it so you can see what's going through my head and why I approach them this way.

I'd like to get an imgur gallery up that includes the covers of books, their table of contents, a sample practice test and answer key. That being said, all of my books are Mandarin versions, not English ones. If you happen to have copies of any of the books I mention in that comment, please let me know. I'd appreciate help getting screenshots/photos of books not localized to Taiwan.

Level VI: You might not believe this, but trees have *roots*

At this point, if you aren't yet sick of grammar, I think it would be beneficial to learn more about theoretical linguistics and how grammar works in general. This sort of general knowledge can often help give some sense of meaning to what might otherwise seem like arbitrary rules and distinctions. If you're interested in learning languages other than Japanese, this sort of knowledge will also help you to take what you learn here and apply it to your new language.

For example, consider the following sentence:

葉っぱが落ちている
はっぱがおちている

Depending on the context, this single sentence may have two meanings:

1. Leaves are falling
2. Leaves are (sitting on the ground)

This has to do with something called *verbal aspect* (in more detail). You probably know that there are different parts of speech (ie, nouns and verbs) and you might have heard of some complicated terminology like *modal verbs* or *verb participles*. That's just scratching the surface, though! There's actually a ton of different ways to discuss verbs (and all of the other parts of speech).

In this case, a difference exists because there are two "different" 落ちる's at play, so to speak.

1. One 落ちる is functioning as a *dynamic* verb of *achievement*. In this case, ～ている indicates that the action is still in progress. Leaves are falling.
2. The other 落ちる is functioning as a *static* verb. In this case, ～ている indicates that there has been a change of state (not fallen>fallen) that is persistent.

I recommend you pick a topic you're interested in and, at a point in time where doing so seems useful to you, find a relevant Wikipedia entry. Read it, then start working through the listed references and Googling around.

Day 21: Vocabulary

You've stuck with me for over 50 pages, I'm shocked. *Word,* man. (terrible pun absolutely intended).

I've pushed vocabulary off for another week for two main reasons:

- This is enough time to get through the first chapter of Genki, so you can now start playing a little bit with the words you learn. Vocab is more fun when you can use it.
- I believe the factor which will most affect your success in this early stage is how consistently you stick to your learning schedule, whatever it is. I don't want to overload you.

Vocabulary Homework

This section is going to be a bit funky. On one hand, there's not a lot to say about vocabulary:

> *Keep adding pennies to the stack and eventually you'll have a dollar.*
> *Three dollars or so buys you a freshly baked melon pan. Melon pan is good.*

That being said, I wouldn't call the acquisition of vocabulary a simple process. There's a lot of nuanced stuff going on behind the scenes, especially between words. The way we look at vocabulary changes over time and there's a lot more to a word than meets the eye.

First, please read this article. It is one of the most useful things I've read about language learning.

The Power Law Distribution and the Harsh Reality of Language Learning

Level I: Intentional Learning & The Construction of a Vocabulary Core

I believe that the best way to build a strong vocabulary is to immerse a lot, particularly by reading or listening to books. Writing is an intentional and prepared presentation of language that gives authors all the time they need to use what they feel are exactly the right words in exactly the right fashion; we just don't drop words like *assiduous* or *perennial* in everyday speech.

As someone who reads above all for pleasure, I also believe that it's a major headache to force your way through content that's above your level, and at this stage of the game, pretty much *everything* is above your level. That in mind, we'll first learn just enough vocab to make reading become tolerable.

That's where Anki comes in.

Basic Anki

1. Download Anki and figure out how it works (less detail/more detail)
2. Download the Core2k deck and import it into your Anki
   (If you like MIA's approach, buy the N5 Tango book and get MIA's basic vocab deck instead)
3. Adjust Anki to have the deck give you 11 new cards per day; you'll finish in 182 days

To get more out of your time on Anki / if you're interested in pitch accent

4. Download the MIA Japanese addon
5. Following Matt's instructions, you've got a few things to do:
   → Use the *active fields* feature to inject MIA Japanese's javascript into the Core 2k deck, or
   → Convert the Core 2k note type to the MIA Japanese note type
   (You'll have to map the fields of the Core 2000 note type to MIA Japanese:
   + Expression > expression | sentence-English > meaning | sentence-audio > audio
   + Everything else, including *audio on front,* should be mapped to *nothing*
   + I recommend adding two fields to the MIA Japanese note type:
   *vocab-EN (*map kanji-furigana to this) and *vocab-JP* (map vocab-english to this).
   You'll need to edit the *cards* template, adding *vocab-jp* to the card's front and *vocab-EN* to the card's back.
   → Mass generate *furigana* and *pitch accent* for each card. This will add furigana to all of The kanji and also color-code each word to show what its pitch accent pattern is.
   If you like MIA or Anki, you might also be interested in MIA's addon morphman
6. I personally like low-key anki, also from MIA
7. If you're at a higher level, you can use Nayr's Core 5000 instead of the Core 2000. The sentences in this deck are slightly longer and use more advanced grammar.

From Matt: Human brains are hardwired for color. If every time you see the word がくせい (student) it's blue, you'll unconsciously associate it with blueness. Blue means heiban in my system, and if you know that, then you've just memorized this word's pitch accent. You can effortlessly memorize accents "for free" over time.

Level II: Natural Acquisition & The Construction of Lexical Associations

While there's a lifetime worth of words and concepts to learn in Japanese, or any language, there is only a finite amount of language contained within any given piece of Japanese media. The average adult native speaker of English might know up to 40,000 words or so, but there are less than 6,200 unique words in the first book of Harry Potter. That's a pretty massive difference, and good for us.

It means that you are *much* closer to being able to consume a given piece of content in Japanese than you are to mastering Japanese. You can give yourself an easier time by doing two things:

- Going out of your way to find shorter content. Less total words = less unique words.
- Focusing on vanilla/slice-of-life content that doesn't call for many unique/technical words.

Given how few words you need to consume something like NHK Easy News or Harry Potter compared to how many words a Japanese person would actually know, I think this makes a good transition point. I intentionally learn/cram words until I reach a point in which consuming some sort of content is possible. After that point, I begin focusing on input and learning more organically.

That's a cool point to reach and, ultimately, is where I'm hoping to take you. Here's how:

1. The sentences in your Core 2000 cards are where we start. Never mind 6,200 words for Harry Potter, your first reading tasks will start from 5 or 6 words in length (Anki sentences).

2. You'll eventually (quite soon!) be able to move on to *actual* Japanese. Here's a few options: NHK Easy News | Matcha | Watanoc | Satori Reader | LingQ's Mini Stories | Other NHK

3. When you're feeling confident with the above content, start reading for real. Here's a blog post where I discuss all the books I read from graded content to Murakami Haruki.

The "right" time to move on will differ from person to person because it depends on:

1. How well you tolerate ambiguity, as not everything will make sense right away
2. How patient you are, as due to this ambiguity, you'll be Googling lots of stuff

I don't think there's really a right or wrong time; everybody is different. I do think that most people wait longer than necessary to begin immersing, but that's part of learning how to learn.

You can make your progress more tangible by mining sentences to use with Anki (part II). If you don't, you'll forget most words you look up and thus have to look them up again later. That being said, you can only look the same word up so many times; eventually, it sticks. I'm happy repeatedly looking up words because I enjoy reading much, much more than grinding on Anki. You do you.

Level III: Cramming & Important but Low-Frequency Vocabulary

While I don't personally enjoy using Anki, learning a language involves lots of memorization. I personally chose to take potentially a less efficient but (for me) more enjoyable approach to vocab: I read. A lot. In the beginning, reading was less about the story and more about exposing myself to new vocab and grammar/sentence structures.

That being said, I still make regular use of Anki. There's some stuff that just must be memorized, and for that stuff, nothing beats Anki. If you're interested in how your usage of Anki might change over time, here's how I personally use it today:

1. **Pitch Accent**

   I didn't learn about pitch accent until I was comfortable reading Murakami. I didn't feel like the opportunity cost of learning accents was worth it for a long time, so I didn't. I instead spent time learning about how it worked, figuring I'd pick it up over time if I understood it.

   A couple months ago, I discovered MIA's addon, MIA Japanese. Personally speaking, it's been a game changer. I used a random deck of Japanese sentences, ran them through MIA Japanese's addon to color code the words by their accent, and I'm slowly memorizing the pitches of common words. It's pretty quick going, as I already know all the words/grammar.

2. **Specific/technical vocab**

   I spent two years in Japan during university, and during my second year, I took a psychology gen-ed that was conducted in Japanese. I used Anki to memorize lots of specific vocabulary words for different parts of the brain; stuff that was important for class but I didn't feel I could expect to learn via conversations or reading stuff for fun.

   Anki is great for cramming technical vocab that you might need, for whatever reason.

3. **Sentences mined from stuff I'm reading**

   As I mentioned earlier, I make quite a few notes in books while reading. If I stumble into unknown words, a useful sentence structure or just a beautiful line, it gets tagged with a number and noted in the margin. I find that a fair bit of this gets committed to memory over the course of the book, but if I really want to remember something, it goes into Anki.

In other words, I think that Anki is sort of like an insurance policy. You'd probably be fine without it, and the stuff that you do forget probably won't really get in your way… but just to be sure, when it comes to the things you're particularly concerned about, there's Anki.

Vocabulary Discussion

The three levels I've proposed for this vocabulary section are rooted in the way I feel about a number of important issues related to language and our memory. I'd like to walk through a number of them so that it'll be easier to find out where we do and don't agree with each other.

Many of these topics are interrelated, so it might be better to think of these as being section headers for one cohesive idea (the homework levels I laid out), rather than a random list of topics.

We'll talk about the following things:

1. Learning vs Acquisition: The "stages" of language acquisition
2. The "Nope" Threshold: How many words you need to *learn*
3. Beyond Anki: Why even native speakers must take literature classes
4. Circumlocutions: The superpower you get from monolingual dictionaries
5. The Arcane: Memory palaces and "obscure" memorization techniques

Mortimer J. Adler on vocabulary and communication:

> *If the author uses a word in one meaning, and the reader reads it in another, words have passed between them, but they have not come to terms. Where there is unresolved ambiguity in communication, there is no communication, or at best it must be incomplete. (ch10)*

Learning vs Acquisition: The "stages" of language acquisition

The way that you interact with Japanese, including how you approach vocabulary/grammar/etc, will change over time. I think that there are, loosely speaking, three stages: intentional learning, organic acquisition and then fine-tuning. Different knowledge is important at each stage.

The levels I proposed in the homework section were inspired by a video from Steven Kaufman, a polyglot with decades of experience, in which he discusses three stages of language acquisition, his response to a presentation by the linguist Stephen Krashen. Here's what they mean, to me:

1. **Stage One, Intentional Learning**
   A particularly determined learner *could* jump right into a text, with zero background knowledge, if they really wanted to. They'd spend significantly more time with their noses in a dictionary or grammar resource than in the text itself, as little to nothing on the page would make sense to them, but they *could* do it. It just wouldn't be a very fun experience.

   While anything we consume in the language is just "noise" at this point, as Steve puts it, it is far from being *random* noise. I've suggested you start with Anki because I believe that spending some time to intentionally pre-learn the most frequently occuring of these noises will save you enough dictionary-time to make **the "nope" threshold** more reachable.

   Where the threshold falls, exactly, will differ from person to person. Wherever it is, though:
   - Before this point, reading is such a burden that we "nope" out of any sort of immersion
   - After this point, while still a burden, reading/immersion will have become tolerable

2. **Stage Two, Organic Acquisition**
   There are countless words that we *could* need to know, but unless you've got the know-how to parse all of the material you want to consume, it's difficult to know *when* you'll need them. That in mind, I believe we should only intentionally learn what we can confidently expect we'll need to know, no matter what we consume. Anki helps us to do this.

   In other words, Anki is not a silver bullet. Some knowledge, like collocative meaning or pragmatics, can only be obtained by immersing in the language. Anki can teach you only what you know you don't know, but you'll more often be inhibited by the things that you don't know you don't know, which we'll discuss in the sections on comprehension + anki.

3. **Stage Three, Fine Tuning**:
   While Anki isn't perfect, it's excellent at what it does: helping you to remember the stuff you make a conscious decision to remember. Some things occur so rarely (particular names or especially striking lines) that we won't remember them unless we choose to do so.

See also: Learning vs Acquisition | Stephen Krashen on Language Acquisition | The Role of SRS

The "Nope" Threshold: How many words do you need to *learn*?

The first set of 1,000 words offers you over 250x more "coverage" than the 10th set of 1,000 words does. That in mind, you probably want to approach your first and tenth set of 1,000 words differently.

You've likely heard that 1,000 most frequently occurring words make up ~79% of a given text, or something like that. While the exact words that first thousand is comprised of and how far they'll take you differs a bit from text to text—Netflix subtitles, economic newspaper articles and YA fantasy books are not made equally—there's a definite pattern to be observed here.

It looks something like this:

- The first 1,000 words yields ~78% coverage of vocabulary in a given text
- The second 1,000 words yields ~86% coverage
- The third 1,000 words yields ~90% coverage
- The fourth 1,000 words yields ~92% coverage
- From 5,000, each additional 1,000 words yields less than 1% additional coverage
- From 10,000, each additional 1,000 words yields mere tenths of percent additional coverage

We get a few coverage points from proper nouns that aren't on these lists, so we actually only need ~5,000 words to hit 95% coverage. A language like French has 27% lexical similarity with English, further reducing the amount of words you need to learn. Japanese, unfortunately, has close to none. In other words, if French learners begin their studies at "square zero", Japanese learners start at "square [negative number]". In other words, *it isn't just you.*

Anyhow, on coverage vs comprehension:

- At 80% vocabulary coverage, **zero of 66 students** could pass a reading comprehension test
- At 90-95% coverage, students begin passing the test, but most still fail.
- A 98% coverage... [seems necessary for dictionary-less comprehension of a fiction text]

This is somewhat oversimplified, so go ahead and read the actual papers if you're really interested in this sort of thing (for good measure), but **I'm basically trying to demonstrate four things:**

1. Here's what 80% comprehension feels like. I'm confident you want more than this.
2. The first few thousand words offer a hugely disproportionate amount of value, but
3. If you want to consume *any* sort of real content, you'll definitely need more than that
4. 95% coverage means 1 in 20 words is unknown. The average length of a sentence in Harry Potter 1 is 12 words, so you'll encounter an unknown word every other sentence.

Ultimately, no matter how many words you memorize, you'll still run into trouble when you begin reading. That being said, there *is* a threshold of words at which you'll be running into little enough trouble as to find your immersion tolerable. I refer to this as the *"nope" threshold*. I believe that we should intentionally learn vocabulary until this point, and then focus on organic acquisition after reaching it. As we keep immersing, tolerable will eventually become more and more enjoyable.

Beyond Anki: Why native speakers must take literature classes

According to the Brown Corpus, the word "the" accounts for 7% of English text. If you were to delete all words except "the", however, you would understand not 7% of the message being conveyed but 0%. Vocabulary coverage does not equal comprehension, so at some point, you must go beyond Anki.

Does knowing 6,000 most common Japanese words mean understanding Japanese? I don't think so.

For one, from where did this frequency list come from? The language of an economic newspaper article, Harry Potter and everyday speech is not the same. In other words, the 2,000 words you learn might not necessarily be the ones that you need to understand what you're trying to read. More often than not, you'll find yourself reading Mad Libs: enough vocab to understand the *structure* of what's being discussed, not enough to understand what *is* being discussed. Again with the power law distribution, long-tail words are disproportionately valuable for comprehension.

Continuing on, you only need to learn 135 words to familiarize yourself with 50% of modern English text (modern being 1961). That being said, being able to identify 50% of the words used in a text doesn't enable you to distil 50% of that text's meaning. This holds true as we increase our word counts, too. After all, quipped a Japanese professor, Japanese people can all read, so why in the hell must Japanese students take Japanese literature classes at university?

His answer, in so many words, is that comprehension is a multi-dimensional thing. We engage with language on many levels, big and small, and the level of isolated, individual words (ie, anki) is only one such level. *Reading*, says this professor, is *carefully examining the surface of something (a text), and from what you see, trying to discern what lies underneath it; to understand what lies at its core.*

Let's take a brief overview of some of these levels, again referencing Van Doren & Adler's book:

- *Basic orthography*: Can you connect the correct sounds to the correct kana?
- *Individual words*: Can you follow a string of phonemes or kana well enough to recognize a Japanese word as being Japanese? Know its translation? Understand a simple sentence?
- *Kanji:* Can you recognize a kanji when you see it? Can you associate a kanji with the phonetic and semantic information tied to it? Do you know what words a kanji is associated with?
- *Between words*: Words don't exist in a vacuum, so you can't really know a word without also knowing all the words connected to it. You don't know *densha* just by knowing *train* (cool resources: JP / EN); you also need to know that trains *run*, rather than *sliding* or *rolling*.
- *Around words*: Words exist in vast inter-related families. For example, vehicle + train have a relationship of hypernym + hyponym; train and plane have a paradigmatic relationship.
- *Grammar:* Grammar is what tells you how words are related to each other, or in other words, the sigmatic relationships between words. Like words, there are also relationships between grammar points: when you hear *if*, do you not expect to later hear *then?*

- *Sentences*: If you understand the words being used in a sentence and the grammar that's connecting them, you can think on the level of phrases, clauses and sentences. Can you keep track of the flow of sentences, putting this one in context of the last one?

At this point, you've established a "surface level understanding" of Japanese; given familiarity with the words and grammar, you can understand what is being said. That being said, when dealing with longer texts, you might not understand why it was said.

Up until this point, we've been reading at an **elementary level**: we are merely concerned with what is sitting on the surface, what the author is literally saying. (see p7; ch2 "the levels of reading"). You may find that you get vocab right in Anki, but can't use it in a real conversation. It's a spectrum.

After this point we get into **analytical reading**. It takes a much higher level of understanding to succinctly explain the function of a paragraph or the point of an entire book than it does to follow a command or make sense of an isolated sentence.

- *Paragraphs:* Sentences work together to build stuff. Can you follow their flow well enough to understand the purpose of a given paragraph? Why did the author include it?
- *Essays or chapters:* Paragraphs come together to establish the spokes of an argument or to progress the plot.Why did the editor think this one was so important they didn't cut it?
- *Texts*: People don't write books for no reason. Can you explain, in one sentence, the point of this book? What was the author most trying to say?

Like words, books don't exist in isolation, either. We can keep going with this: **synoptical reading**.

- *Authors:* What makes a Murakami book a Murakami? What tropes do we find in his stories? What do his main characters have in common? We can talk about a lot of stuff.
- *Genres:* What makes a romance a romance? How does this particular book conform or subvert the expectations we have of a [genre] of novel?
- *Periods:* What makes a 1971 horror story like The Exorcist different from an earlier one, like H.P. Lovecraft's 1928 The Dunwich Horror or the 2014 Bird Box? How are they similar?
- *Cultures*: Although they both involve scary creatures in a dark house, what separates a US film like Lights Out or The Exorcist from a Japanese one like The Grudge or The Ring?
- *Movements:* Authors of the same zeitgeist will share many influences; how does a modern novel differ from a postmodern novel?

Anybody with a basic understanding of the language can explain a sentence by using a single sentence (in our case, that's what we're doing in Anki) but not everybody can paraphrase a paragraph into a sentence. Fewer still can explain the function of a chapter in a sentence, and very few readers can explain an entire book in a sentence. It's very easy to read without understanding, hence even Japanese people need to take Japanese literature classes—and, ultimately, while you'll eventually need to move beyond Anki if you want to reach any real level of proficiency.

Circumlocution: The superpower you get from monolingual dictionaries

Circumlocutions are phrases that circle around a specific word without directly using it; definitions in a dictionary, for example, are circumlocutory. A dictionary uses words you do know to explain words you don't know. If you can do the same thing, you gain significant freedom in communication.

A problem that comes with learning vocabulary is that not all words are created equal.

- The word *not* is an incredibly valuable word: it basically doubles the amount of ideas you can express. If you know *not* and *cold*, you can express the idea of *hot*, too.
- The word *giraffe* is not a very valuable word. Whereas the word *not* is generative and continues creating value as your vocabulary grows, a giraffe is just a giraffe.
- Many words are sort of useful because they can be used for metaphors. Take the word *coffee*, for example. If you don't know the word *inspiration*, you could describe something as being *coffee for my life* and the person you're talking to would get the idea. *It gives you energy.*

Placing words in these sorts of mental hierarchies is an integral part of deciding which vocabulary to learn. Ideally, the words you're learning at any given time are ones that (a) unlock the most degrees of freedom or (b) solve a concrete problem you're trying to deal with.

- Another valuable word is *want*. If you know *want* and *not*, you can automatically express four ideas with any verb you learn. Modal verbs are great to know, too.
- The word *penicillin* is pretty specific, but it's very important to me, personally. My life literally depends on my doctor knowing that I am allergic to it.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to know how useful a word is before you look it up. Say you come across the word (海馬)状隆起 in Japanese, for example. If you've gotten through the kanji section already, you'll see it and think *"sea… horse… status quo… humps… rouse…,"* then lament that you've wasted your time* when you plug it into a dictionary and see that it means *hippocampus*.

Hippocampus is, unfortunately, not a very useful word. I learned it three years ago when I took a psychology gen ed in Japan and I haven't used it since; it's a giraffe. If you looked this word up on a Japanese-English dictionary, you'll have just lost three seconds of your life. You are almost certainly going to forget this word before you get the opportunity to use it, if you ever do.

The Benefits of a Monolingual Dictionary

That being said, your time wouldn't have been wasted if you'd used a Japanese-Japanese dictionary instead. The fact that you're probably not going to drop 海馬状隆起 in a conversation anytime soon doesn't change, but you make up for this loss by getting exposed to a variety of important structures and vocabulary that you well could use in your next conversation.

See Weblio's definition of hippocampus:

> 大脳の古皮質に属する部位で、欲求・本能・自律神経などのはたらきとその制御を行う。*Located in the cerebral paleocortex, [it] facilitates the working and regulation of our desires, instincts and the autonomic nervous system.*

Something like that brings you more value than the one word translation that is *hippocampus*

- It's reading practice that's got a much lower bar for entry than novels or blog articles
- A ten word definition offers much more clarity than a one word translation. If you translated the word 制御 from above then you'd see that it translates to *control*… but what sort of control? Is it positive or negative? Is it *control* as in *regulate, direct, manage, oversee, restrain, guide, dominate, rule over, govern, influence, handle, manipulate, or suppress?*
- You get a lot of juicy information about *word associations* that a translation lacks
- Consuming a lot of definitions helps you to master the structures that Japanese employs to explain things. You can repurpose them for your own purposes in a conversation.
- By nature, a dictionary explains complicated words with more basic ones. While *hippocampus* is probably useless to you, words like *desire*, *such as* or [*location*] aren't.
- Less tangibly speaking, the ability to make sense of complicated Japanese by using simpler Japanese means you're becoming independent: that's a cool feeling.

Some reservations

While I think that everybody should strive to make the monolingual transition as soon as possible, as Matt vs Japan calls it, I don't think it's practical to do right away or in all scenarios.

- Some foundational knowledge is necessary. If you don't know the words *located, control, instinct* or *desire*, you'll also have to look up those words. You can quickly find yourself clicking through a dozen words and grammar points if you start too easily.
- Some words (particularly nouns) just don't lend themselves to definition. Take the word *pine*, for example: *any of a genus (Pinus of the family Pinaceae, the pine family) of coniferous evergreen trees that have slender elongated needles and include some valuable timber trees and ornamentals.* That's a mouthful in English, nevermind my bothering in Japanese.

Steps to transition, even at a low level

1. Look up the translation of your word in question
2. Look up the same word in a monolingual dictionary
3. See if you can make sense of the definition, knowing what it's describing
4. If not, look up translations of unknown words in the monolingual definition
5. If you're still confused, Google around to figure out the grammar that is confusing you
6. Eventually, start skipping step one. Read the definition, then check if your guess was right.
7. When you're comfortable with that, start using a monolingual dictionary for step 4.

Ultimately, circumlocutions are the difference between being silent and saying *uhh.. That thing that hockey players wear on their heads* when you don't know the word *helmet.* Big improvement!

The Arcane: Memory Palaces and “Obscure” Memorization Techniques

Lalalala this is a placeholder

Month 7: Input

WIP. Will hopefully finish in April, 2020.

Transitioning to input-based content: I think that this is going to be different for each person and that it ultimately comes down to your tolerance for ambiguity. Some people will be comfortable moving on early, some people will prefer to wait to move on until they can hit the ground running. Both approaches are okay.

On progressing, logically, through content

On switching to a J>J dictionary (daijisen example)
A few resources to help reading
Kokokoza

colorful words / slang
Recommendation by someone who just passed the N3
15 books read in 6 month period before taking the N2 (part II)
A beginner's guide for reading Japanese manga and stories
From Minna no Nihongo: One book for N5/N4 + one for N3
Manabi reader - word and kanji tracking

(~ first 2 min) "Input because, frankly, I don't have that many people to talk to. On the contrary, however, I've always got a book or podcast."

Some super cool dudes made a manga for learners, start here: Crystal Hunters
(also give them some love on reddit)

Day XX: Output

WIP. Will hopefully finish in May, 2020.

Input > scripts/shadowing > output

My opinion on the needs of different leveled students & getting the most out of iTalki
finding language exchange partners
The problem with language partners (literally do anything else)
Goldilocks CEFR levels (Perhaps this would go better in the intro?)
Something has to give / making time in a full life (maybe should go in intro)?
My experience

It's okay to be passionate about language

Talk about paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships here (video)
What 80% comprehension feels like
Vocab retention

The Power Law Distribution (&& Zipf's Law?)

→ Also, this eventually limit the benefit you get from conversation? Given that the last (~20k words) only yield (??%) extra comprehension, native speakers can vastly reduce the complexity of their speech without it necessarily coming off as simple. Speaking with 100% of their vocabulary vs 40% of their vocabulary is a difference of 9X% comprehension to 99.X% comprehension… not really balanced.

TL;DR -- how many words do you need? Good question. Hard answer.

- Surprisingly few words to have good conversations
- Here's special relativity in less than 750 words, according to planetcalc
- FloFlo, interesting stats on how many words you need to read a variety of books / comparison of difficulty level of books by different publishers

Note: I think that looking at bilingual texts (flash cards or subtitles) is important, too. When I began translating I was shocked to find that it wasn't easy rendering Japanese texts into English even though I knew exactly what was being said in Japanese. I could talk abou what was meant, why certain grammar points were used over others, and explain the entire situation… but laying down a concrete English sentence was surprisingly difficult.

You'll likely find the same thing, at some point in the future. Just because you can understand what something means in Japanese, and explain it in Japanese, doesn't necessarily mean you'll know an equivalent English phrase.

I think that these "equivalents" are important, especially to getting you started. So in the beginning you see an English card that says something like *to tell the truth* or *I guess….* And think, hey! That looks useful. Then you double check how it works in Japanese, and bam! You've filled in a small hole. You'll probably find that the usage scenarios don't 100% overlap, but it'll get you started. A lot of language is idiomatic, even if it doesn't overtly seem so (what does the sum of the words *get along with* mean?) -- but if you're concerned about *function*, you can skip the bits about mincing words and move onto how a given idea would actually be expressed.

So you aren't concerned with how to literally say *I'm surprised to say…* you're just concerned with how Japanese people preface another statement to indicate that they're surprised. And then when that situation comes up, you drop in your functional statement.

Each level has 1,050 - 1,120 words

Day XX: Creation and “Mastery”

Interviews

Before we get into the conversations, I'd like to briefly explain how I went into these interviews and then quote a paragraph from a book on writing to elaborate on why I wanted to do it like this.

Simply put, I had two goals going into every one of these conversations:

- Be able to present something concrete and useful to learners; replicable approaches and tangible insights that might not otherwise be apparent to a beginner.
- In some small way, give each creator a platform in which they can share with learners a bit of the sense of wonder they find in their areas of specialization.

That in mind, I've intentionally strayed away from pointed and/or negative questions. My goal here is to gather insights that can help *you*, and I believe that each creator here has something to offer.

As Ronald D. Tobias says in *20 Master Plots: And How to Build Them*:

> *If you use your characters to say what you want them to say, you're writing propaganda. If your characters say what they want to say, you're writing fiction.*

I'm not interested in serving language learning propaganda to you. There's plenty of that out there.

> *How, then, do you avoid writing propaganda? First start with your attitude. If you have a score to settle or a point to make, or if you're intent on making the world see things your way, go write an essay.* ***If you're interested in telling a story****, a story that grabs us and fascinates us, a story that captures the paradoxes of living in this upside-down world,* ***write fiction****…*
>
> *You can always tell propaganda because the writer has a cause. The writer is on a soapbox lecturing, telling us who is good and who is bad and what is right and what is wrong. Lord knows we get lectured to enough in the real world;* ***we don't read or go to the movies so someone else can lecture to us some more.***
>
> *Isaac Bashevis Singer claimed characters had their own lives and their own logic, and that the writer had to act accordingly. You manipulate characters in the sense that you make them conform to the basic requirements of your plot. You don't let them run roughshod over you. In a sense,* ***you build a corral for your characters to run around in. The fence keeps them confined to the limitations of the plot****. But where they run inside the corral is a function of each character's freedom to be what or who he wants within the confines of the plot itself.*
>
> - *Tobias, Ronald B.. 20 Master Plots (p. 51-52). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*

The plot we're dealing with here is your own learning, and the "corral" I've placed each creator in is that they must work towards benefitting your learning; helping you to do what they specialize in.

Idahosa Ness on Pronunciation

Idahosa studied [was it speech pathology? Phonology? Can't remember] and believes that phonetics is the foundation upon which language learning rests; he encourages people to learn languages by ear, tuning into its array of elemental sounds. Here's a brief introduction from him:

> *Block quote of something*

I find Idahosa to be very personable and good at approaching the stuff he discusses in a manner that's relevant to his audience. I think that the study of pronunciation gets a bad rap amongst language learners, so I approached him in the hopes of making it more tangible and real:

- Why people should care about pronunciation in the first place, anyway
- What the process of going from zero to speaking a foreign language looks like, to him
- What is a simple way that people can practice their pronunciation for free
- What are the most common pronunciation mistakes an English speaker will make?

Why should people care about their pronunciation?

Asd

The Process, P1: What is *listening*, actually?

Something that I think a lot of people miss is that audio input is actually a combination of two things: **objective sounds that can be measured**, yeah, but also **our subjective perception of those sounds**. I can perfectly understand and replicate English sounds because of the mirror neuron effect: as a kid I heard the people around me making certain sounds with their mouths, I mirrored those sounds and after a few years I became able to perfectly mimic my peers. This basic set of sounds formed the foundation upon which everything else I ever did in English rested upon.

You might say that we're "in tune" with English. We've got the tuning knob set to 100.8 or wherever it is and all the waves are coming in nice and clear, which then enables us to correctly make out what people on the radio are saying. **When we can make out what they're saying we can then process it, engage with it, and respond to it**. Being in-tune with English is essential for us to function in an English speaking society.

That being said, it also creates some problems for people that later on try to learn a different language. Each language has its own "radio station" of objective sounds, so to speak. When we hear a foreign language for the first time it's just static on the radio. **Working on pronunciation is just a process of messing with the tuning dial to find clearer channels, gradually reducing the**

static until we've found the right station. Once you've got that, it's not a problem to bounce between 96.4 French and 100.8 English, or whatever your languages are.

An Exercise: How can complete beginners begin thinking about pronunciation?

There are lots of fancy tools like the international phonetic alphabet that help us describe sounds more accurately, but all of that stuff is ultimately just a means to an end. **The end goal is just to be able to move your mouth in a way that accurately mirrors a Japanese person's mouth.** The first step to that goal is simply noticing when discrepancies exist between the sounds coming out of your mouth and a Japanese person's mouth when you're talking. So here's what we do:

Here's how you can start learning the phonemes that exist in Japanese:

1. Get ahold of some brief recordings of Japanese speech; a few seconds at max.

   (*Sui: you might take the MP3s from the Core2k on Anki, look up random words on Forvo or take audio clips from Japanese YouTube vloggers)*

2. Record yourself trying to mimic whatever you just listened to

3. Download a free program like Audacity that lets you slow the tracks down, layer them on top of eachother and listen to both at once (tutorial).

4. Listen for discrepancies.

   For now we aren't worried about why these discrepancies exist and we're also not worried about how to fix them. Write out what you were saying, listen along and then just mark whenever something sounds funny to you.

   (*Sui: If you've ever played music, Idahosa is basically talking about consonance and dissonance. Where do your sounds match natural Japanese, where don't they?)*

   If you can, it'd be great to grab a Japanese person to help you with this. Again, they don't have to know why you sound funny; we're not worried about the why for now. Just have them listen along and mark your speech up—*you sound like a gaijin here, here and here.*

5. As you go on, try to **observe patterns of discrepancy** that exist between your speech and Japanese people's speech and make a short list of them. You're going to get a lot of them right, because Japanese and English phonemes have a good amount of overlap, but you'll also notice some stuff that doesn't quite feel right.

6. Once you've got your list, **start paying attention for those discrepancies**. Be active about it; mimic what you hear, and don't just do the same thing. Change the shape of your lips, move your tongue around a bit. Experiment and look for stuff that lessens the discrepancy between your speech and a Japanese person's speech.

The Process, P2: Audio Input + Pronunciation Training in General

A bit of knowledge becomes helpful at this level. You could approach all this stuff in so much more depth, so you don't have to step here, but to put it very simply:

- **Consonants and vowels are articulated in specific ways.**
  (*Sui: those "specific ways" he's referring to are place of Articulation, manner of Articulation, and voicing. You can also describe vowels in terms of height, backness and rounding.)*
- **Syllables are arranged melodically**: they've got an intonation, a flow and a rhythm.
  (*Sui: see below sections two and three).*

Depending on how much you know about pronunciation, spending a bit of time learning about how this stuff works might be beneficial. Anyhow, **at this stage, you've got a couple main goals**:

1. **Learn to correctly say all of the syllable combinations that exist in Japanese**
   (*Sui: the "combination of sounds" is referred to as "phonotactics"... super cool!*
   In Japanese, this basically amounts to learning the kana. Idahosa is technically referring to what's referred to as morae and contonation... a mora is basically a kana, but not always. Sometimes putting two kana together will yield one mora, as with きょ - kyo.)

   This involves a lot of just playing around, too. Just talking about vowels—whether your tongue is up or down, forward or back, whether your lips are rounded… all this stuff affects the sound that comes out of your mouth. Move your tongue around and see what effect it has on your sound. What's the difference between a vowel that's more forward and one that's more back? What happens when you make a small, tight circle with your lips?

2. **Isolate its intonation patterns**; for now, just practice by humming along with speech.
   (*Sui: this means learning the basic pitch accent patterns; what patterns are, and are not, possible in Japanese? && there's an activity/example on page 3 of the first link).*

3. **Pay attention to the rhythm of Japanese speech**: make some nonsense sounds to the beat.
   Shall I com- pare thee to a sum- mer day?
   *ti **TA** ti- **TA** ti **TA** ti **TA** ti **TA***

   Does rhythm work the same in English and Japanese? English has stressed syllables and unstressed syllables; does Japanese? English dices up sounds and makes liaisons; does

Japanese?

Japanese speech is pretty fast, so you're probably not going to be able to mimic at full speed right away. Take some time to learn about how sound is made and, armed with that knowledge, start mimicking it. **You'll gradually "tune in" to Japanese the more you actively listen, so as you begin hearing more clearly and noticing more patterns, try to replicate this in your own speech.**

The Process, P3: Building Lines and Stacks

You need vocabulary words to speak a language, but **it's important to remember that words are not isolated little specks of language**. What's more important is the lines and the stacks that these vocabulary words are parts of. (*Sui: he's talking about the paradigm and syntagm here).*

I don't think that there's a really good tool focusing on this specific stage of language acquisition, so I'm currently in the process of putting together an application called Stax. The app is designed to help you learn to freestyle rap and is based around organizing *stacks* (actors, actions, objects and settings) in different ways to create unique *lines*, which you then put to a beat. You're basically getting practice making sentences that focus on these elements.

For example, I don't speak Japanese, but I have picked up a few random words from the interactions I've had with Japanese media. I know a word for *I, ware*, a word for rice, *gohan*, and a word for eat, *taberu*. Now I've got a basic line: *ware, gohan (wo) taberu!* This line is made of three different "stacks" -- actors, action and object - and as I learn more words, I can swap different ones in and out with other words that are in that stack's "word cloud"— all the words the relevant words I've been exposed to that are within my grasp of Japanese. That cloud will gradually grow as I encounter more words that I've got a real-world need for.

It isn't the mere presence of these words that matter, it's the connection between them that matters. I'm not using the words *ware… gohan… taberu…* I'm using the *line* that I've drawn between those words. Language learning is a process of accumulating more and more lines that bend in ever more abstract ways.

After all, we don't just want to memorize words; we want to integrate them into our lives. We do that by having meaningful experiences with these words, and creation is one type of meaningful experience. The more you mimic and create, the more resourceful you become. It isn't enough to just know the word for *rice*, you've got to be confident and resourceful enough to use it at the drop of a hat in a real conversation.

You're building that confidence and resourcefulness during this stage of pronunciation practice—both putting in the mouth work you need to be comfortable making Japanese sounds and the mental work you need to be comfortable building Japanese lines.

This is a skill that needs to be practiced, even in our native languages.

The Process, P4: Scripting

A script is, fundamentally, a prepared conversation.

During this stage you'll be identifying and practicing scripts. You might:

- Take a clip of a native speaker speaking
- Write a self-introduction or a paragraph in your native language, send it to a native speaker to have it translated into your target language. Ask them to record themself reading it in a natural fashion and send it back to you.

Once you've got your script, approach it in the same way you did the activity from earlier.

1. If you're here, you should understand Japanese at a syllabic level. You know the sounds that exists in Japanese and you can make them mostly accurately.
2. Practice stringing all of the syllables together to make the words of your script, the words to make phrases, the phrases to make sentences, and the sentences to make your paragraph. Each new level builds on the previous one.
3. Keep practicing until you can match native speed. You'll need to put in some significant mouth-work to feel comfortable doing this.
4. After you've got the words down, spend effort to also match the rhythm and intonation of the native speaker.
5. Keep tweaking stuff until your recording sounds as close as possible to the original.

Now bring that script into a conversation.

- Focusing on making use of the words in your script and further committing them to memory
- Look for opportunities to build your "stacks" and expand your "word cloud"
- As you accumulate "lines", play around with them. You can recycle lines and stacks to express a lot of new and novel ideas.

Eventually you'll accumulate enough words and lines to communicate, and with that comes the confidence necessary for spontaneous conversation. **From this point on, you should always be on the lookout for new lines.**

Idahosa walked one of his team members through this process, which you can watch on YouTube (the bit about scripts is Episode 4). Reflecting on the experience in Episode 9, Mike comments:

It was really helpful to go back and review the things I was saying on my calls with a tutor or whoever I was talking to. It helped because I could see exactly what I was doing and the bad habits I had in the middle of a conversation—stuff I didn't necessarily notice in the moment. After viewing that I could go back and figure out how to say something better or more naturally.

Wrap-up & Closing Thoughts

The 80/20 of pronunciation mistakes that native English speakers will make in Japanese

- Pay attention to the length of your [mora]. They vary in English, they don't in Japanese.
- Pay attention to your tongue; where it is, what it's doing. There is tongue movement in English vowels, but there isn't any movement in Japanese vowels. (*Sui: Idahosa is talking about diphthongization of vowels, which he talks about in this post on accent reduction).*
- The Japanese R sound is different than the English one; figure it out.

And a few closing thoughts to leave you with:

- *Learning is complex. Be it language or any new skill, it's super complex at first.* ***At first*** *you've got to use the logical/analytical part of your brain to* ***put all the pieces together manually at first****, but with good practice and repetition,* ***all that eventually*** *gets pushed into the back of your brain, your intuition, and* ***becomes automated.***

  We started by talking about hearing phonemes. At this point you might not even know what a phoneme is and it takes a lot of conscious effort to sort all the sounds out, but over time, it becomes automated. Once that's automatic your brain space will be freed up to focus on other stuff: rhythm, intonation, etc. Once that's all automatic you don't have to worry about how you're saying something and can focus purely on what you're saying: building vocabulary, using more complex grammar, etc. It all builds on itself.

- *Believe that it's possible*—***understand that pronunciation is movement. To fix your pronunciation is to change your movement patterns****. Know that as a human being, you have the capacity to change the movement patterns of your mouth, just as you can do so for running form or any athletic form. If you believe, pay attention, put in the smart effort… You are capable of changing your habits.*
- *Don't just rely on your ears—****stare at peoples' mouths and try to mimic the way their mouth is moving****. The act of bringing your conscious attention to that space will make a huge difference.*
- *Turn on a variety TV show or something where you can actually see peoples' mouths moving and put it on mute. Try to match their mouth movements, head gestures, etc. Facial expressions, physical gestures, and how you carry yourself are all parts of communicating in another language, too.*

Matt v Japan on Kanji, Pitch Accent and the Journey

MvJ intro

[temporarily moved; will add back later]

Nelson Dellis on Memory and Language Learning

[drafting writeup from interview; temporarily moved]

Links that I probably want to use somewhere

How kanji work | Tofugu
Kanji stroke order | Tofugu
On looking words up

Verb conjugation
How particles work
Cool verb conjugation chart
Visual grammar explanations

The original ajatt - might be some useful stuff
How to make a behavior addictive
the like switch

Constructive practice and effortless practice
Genki Companion Website

Thanks

[something or other about a lot of work went into this from a lot of people, but in particular]

- A huge thanks to Virusnzz, the moderator at r/LanguageLearning, for his invaluable feedback.
- A huge thanks to all of the busy content creators who took time out of their day to meet with me for a bit
- A huge thanks to you, for putting up with my writing.

A Request for Feedback

I'm not interested in your money, but if you could spare me a few minutes of your time, I would be more than happy to receive your feedback. I hope to publish a few (fictional) stories, but unfortunately, don't have many opportunities to get constructive criticism on my writing.

If you're willing to leave me feedback, you can do so here. (no email/login required)