

About this website

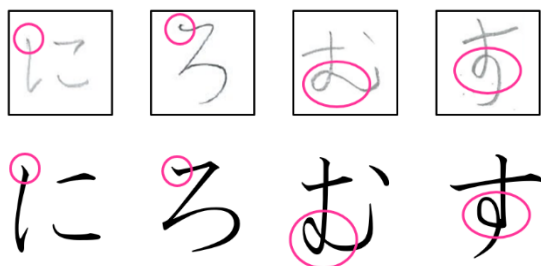
1. "J-Learners" font

The font "J-Learners" is created to help mainly the beginner's level learners practice writing in Japanese by showing examples of each letter.

In Hiragana or Katakana written by learners that some letters are hard to read or in unusual forms for native Japanese speakers even though these letters are not quite wrong or impossible to read. In my teaching years in different institutions, I found common patterns among learners' writings which means there should be reasons in common as well. I also found the majority of the errors were because of the example letters learners look at.

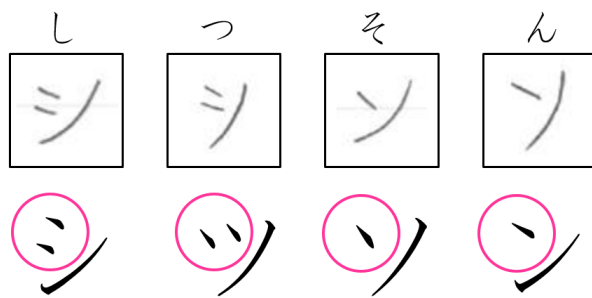
In many conventional textbooks, example letters are typed letters. However, there are subtle differences between typed letters and handwritten letters. Learners tend to exaggerate small parts as shown in examples below when they handwrite letters and that exaggeration becomes to be errors in their handwriting.

Examples



Letters above are written by a beginner's level learner and ones below them are example letters (in "Kyokashotai" font) the learners were given. Parts in red circles in examples are called "shihitsu", a unique feature of Japanese letters when they are written by a brush. Though native Japanese speakers rarely pay attentions to these parts when they handwrite, learners tend to be very cautious about these parts which sometimes make their writing unnatural.

Brushes are not used by beginner's level learners when they practice writing. Pencils or pens are used in many cases. Thus, the decorative parts to make letters look pretty (shihitsu) end up to be excess for beginner's level learners.



Examples above are Katakana letters written by another learner. “Shi” and “Tsu” as well as “So” and “N” look the same because of the lack of clear differences which is commonly seen in writing of learners regardless of their nationalities or their first language. Although “Shi” and “Tsu” and “So” and “N” are completely different letters for native Japanese speakers, these two pairs seem to be a set of very similar letters with small differences beginner’s level learners find hard to see.

As shown above, using typed letters as examples could lead learner’s writings to become errors. The point here is just because learners try to write by copying the example, letters written by them turn out to be unnatural in shape and hard to be read.

With these things in mind “J-Learners” is created in order to make example letters learners can copy the exact shape.

“J-Learners” Samples

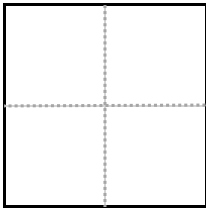
あ い う え お か き く け こ

As in examples above, letters in “J-Learners” are designed as simple as possible without decorative parts such as shihitsu and all strokes are in the same width.

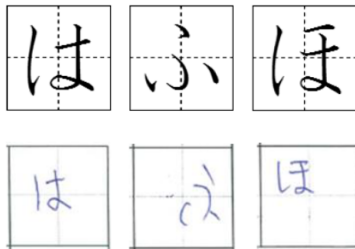
シ ツ ソ ン

In “Shi” and “Tsu”, the first and the second strokes are placed horizontally and vertically respectively. In “So” and “N”, the first strokes in each letter are on 60 degree and horizontal. These are designed to be distinguished from one another easily by learners who are not familiar with these letters in Japanese although that might not make these letters away from originally recognized as beautiful shapes in Japanese calligraphy.

2. New squares

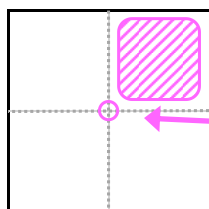


The conventional square for writing practice is a square with a cross in the middle dividing the square to four smaller squares in settings of both teaching Japanese as a foreign language and Japanese as the first language. However, I had been questioning if this square was helpful for people to write letters in good shapes.



Above letters are written by a learner in beginner's level. They are all smaller than examples and they are away a lot from the center of the square. These characteristics are seen commonly among writings by many learners and ones shown here are not exaggerated ones. I came to think that the reason for these common characteristics in learners' writings were not because learners are unfamiliar with these squares but the unsuitableness of these squares with four divisions for writing practice.

Each square is divided into four in order to make writing easier and in good shapes. The cross plays a role as a point of reference. However, the cross does not seem to work well for two reasons listed below.

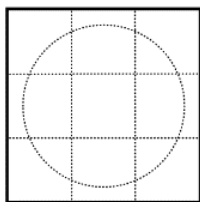


(1) Four smaller squares are too spacious

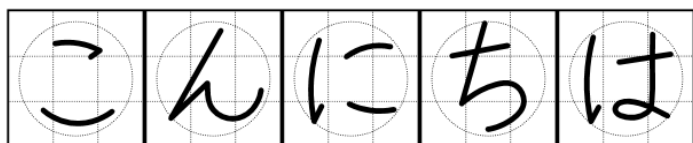
(2) Only two lines and one crossing point are given

Because of the two points above, it is difficult for learners to find where the first stroke starts.

Since these issues are seen, the square below was designed for "J-Learners".



In “J-Learners”, one square is divided into nine smaller squares with one big circle in the center. Two vertical and another two horizontal lines (four crossing points in total) can guide learners to write and can make it easier for them to find where to start writing and where the strokes go precisely.

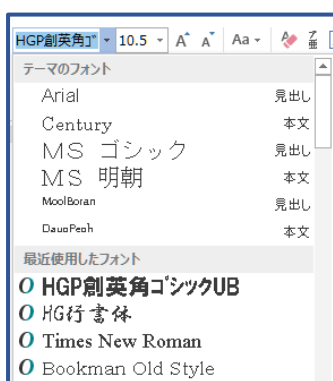


I also placed a circle filling up the big square. This enables learners to find where an example letter is placed in a square and to write well-balanced letters. Additionally, all letters can be in the same size when several letters are written continuously.

I conducted a study asking learners to write in conventional squares with four division and in ones with nine divisions. As a result, the quantitative analysis revealed letters written in squares with nine divisions were better in the aspects of balance and shape.

3. About the font name

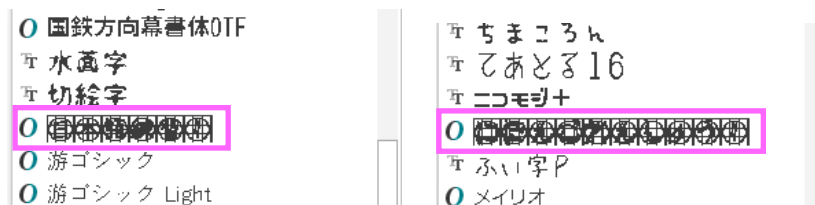
The original name for this font was “Nihongo renshuu (Japanese practice)” in kanji or “Nihongo renshuu” in Hiragana. However, I quickly realized these two would not work.



In Microsoft Word and Excel, users can choose a font to use from font menu on top of the screen. When they change from one font to another, they click an inverse triangle to select one from the list of fonts displayed there. The font names are displayed as in the image above. Each font is shown in

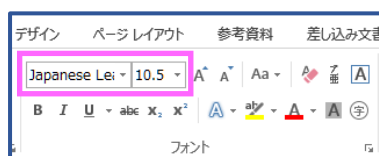
the font style of itself. For example, a font named “XXX Mincho” is shown in “XXX Mincho” and “YYY Gothic” is shown in “YYY Gothic”.

When “Nihongo renshuu (Japanese practice)” in Kanji or “Nihongo renshuu” in Hiragana is displayed in the font style, each letter is hard to read as shown in the image below. This attributes to squares surrounding every letter and numbers indicating stroke orders.

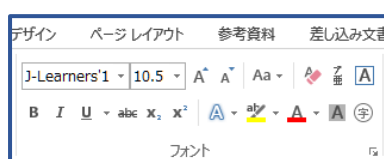


“Nihongo renshuu” in Kanji on the left and “Nihongo renshuu” in Hiragana on the right

Because of the issues above, I decided to use half-width alphanumeric and named my set of three fonts “Japanese Learners”. However, that led to another challenge.



“Japanese Learners” was too long to fit into the font menu. Because the ends of the font name are not displayed, users cannot know which of three fonts (This “Japanese Learners” font comes in three different types) they are typing in. With these challenges, I shortened the name from “Japanese Learners” to “J-Learners”.



With this short name, the whole font name is displayed and users can see which one they chose from “Japanese Learners'1”, “Japanese Learners'2” and “Japanese Learners'3”.

This background story might give an impression that deciding font name went smoothly with the flow, however, it took months and months for me as a complete beginner from coming up with “Nihongo renshuu” in Kanji and “Nihongo renshuu” in Hiragana to settling down with “J-Learners”.

4. About this website

The first thing came up to my mind was to create a font.

When I was teaching abroad, I realized learners writing errors attributed to example letters they were looking at. Although I tried very hard to find a good font on the internet, no good one was found which led me to the idea of making one by myself. I did not know how to make one nor could find a software for it, so I left the idea there.

Then the time I got into graduate school came. The original idea on my thesis proposal was not adopted because of its extensive scale. In continuous discussion with my supervisor in graduate school, many possible ideas had piled up, however, there was no significant one to work on for my thesis. Right before my first summer in graduate school, it was the time to pick my thesis topic. We discussed about example letters for J-Learners and we decided to go with this and the process of creating the font started.

The first time I really involved in Japanese education was in a Institute of Foreign Languages in Samarkand, Uzbekistan as a JICA Overseas Cooperation Volunteer in 2011. Despite of the challenging circumstances of being far away from Japan where it was very difficult to just get one new textbook and there were times teachers bought papers and writing chalks with their own money, students there were very enthusiastic. I cannot forget the time when we got a box full of textbooks from Japan, how moved we were about it, and how excited the whole class was.

Textbooks for writing practice are not used for multiple times and they can only be written on once. However, it is not possible to give new textbooks for students in many classrooms outside of Japan. My font is made with such classrooms in mind.

I used to think it would be easy to make textbooks in these classrooms with this font, but I later found it was not that easy by actually trying by myself. I realized just having this set of font was not enough to make textbooks, so I decided to set up this website.

This website is made for non-native teachers with limited professional experiences in countries or regions far from Japan as end-users. Thus, the foundational concept of this website is to make one that is simple and easy to use.

There may be parts users find that features are limited for that reason. This is due to the concept. Thank you very much for your understandings and I hope this website helps your teaching.