

[Skip to main content](#)

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[Join](#)[r/LearnJapanese](#) > [Wiki](#) > [startersguide](#)

- [What is Japanese?](#)
- - [Japanese Sound System](#)
 - [Japanese Writing System](#)
- [Getting Started](#)
- - [Kana](#)
 - [Comprehensive Study](#)
 - - [Online Guides](#)
 - [Textbooks](#)
 - [Supplementary Study](#)
 - - [Other](#)
- [Moving Forward](#)
- - [Textbooks](#)
 - [JLPT](#)
 - - [JLPT Levels](#)
- [References](#)

Congratulations! You've taken your first step towards learning Japanese! You probably don't feel very accomplished but don't worry; taking the time to make sure you're going in the right direction is the best way to start. We don't make any assumptions of why you're learning Japanese, or how much you already know, so feel free to skim along until you get to a point that is of use to you.

Please remember that this guide has been generated by fellow learners like you. As such, we are not experts in the field of language learning. Also, remember that what works for one person may not necessarily be the best for you. That said, we aim to make the best guide possible to help you on your way. 始めましょう !

Some of the most common questions beginners have are:

- **What's the most efficient way to learn Japanese?**

[Skip to main content](#)[Log In](#)

- **How long does it take to learn Japanese?**

See this [comment](#) but note that the JLPT does not account for speaking and writing. However, it does highlight that Japanese, same as any other language, requires commitment to learn.

Please also see our [Resource Guide](#) and [FAQ](#). Note that DuoLingo and other similar apps are generally NOT recommended. [Also worth checking out is this massive resource.](#)

What is Japanese?

Japanese is the national language of Japan and its people. According to Ethnologue, Japanese is the 9th largest language in the world by number of speakers with 122 million speakers in 25 countries. Though most of native speakers of Japanese reside in Japan, Japanese speakers can also be found in Brazil, Germany, the U.K., the United States of America and many other locations around the globe. In fact, the 2010 U.S. Census estimates that there are approximately 443,000 native speakers of Japanese in the United States alone.

Japanese Sound System

The Japanese sounds system consists of a total of 23 consonant sounds and 5 vowel sounds (Compared to English with 24? consonant sounds and 14 vowel sounds). When spoken, the Japanese language is formed using either vowels or a consonant-vowel pair with the exception of the "n" sound which is the sole single consonant sound used. Additional sounds, such as double consonants and glides, are formed by glottal stops or combining the "i" sound with the "y" sound.

Furthermore, Japanese is a language with pitch accent. These pitches, high and low, are used to distinguish similarly spelled words with different pronunciations. These pitches follow certain rules, such as the first and second mora (syllable) must have different pitches, and that once a word has moved to the low pitch it will not return to the high pitch. Though this may sound complicated to a speaker unfamiliar with pitch-accent languages, the basics are relatively simple to learn and often context makes it obvious what the word is.

Japanese Writing System

The Japanese writing system was introduced around 1500 years ago from China, in the late fourth or early fifth century. Through time, the Japanese language has evolved into its own system. Currently, Japanese has three types of writing: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Kanji, which were imported from China, were traditionally used for both their meaning and their sound. Hiragana is a collection of 46 characters with two diacritical marks that are used to denote the sounds of the Japanese language, and are in particular used for function words and inflectional ending, as well as in some content words. Each hiragana symbolizes with a vowel or a consonant combined with a vowel. The characters evolved as simplifications of traditional Chinese characters with similar sounds during the Heian period (794 -1185) in Japan. Due to the use of hiragana in many women's literary works, such as "Tale of Genji" by Murasaki Shikibu, hiragana was known as onna de, or women's hand. Katakana, which is also a syllabary, is used for loan words, onomatopoeic words and scientific words. Frequent contact has resulted in many words being borrowed from English, though words have also been borrowed from other languages such as German.

Log In

a	ん	わ	つ	や	よ	は	な	た	ご	か	め	a
i			り		み	ひ	に	ち	し	き	い	i
u			る	ゆ	む	ふ	ぬ	つ	す	く	う	u
e			れ		め	へ	ね	て	せ	け	え	e
o		を	ろ	よ	も	ほ	の	と	そ	こ	お	o

Katakana Practice Sheets

[Skip to main content](#)[Log In](#)

Online Guides

Luckily for the modern language learner, the internet is full of free resources for study. When using them, however, make sure that you are using a credible source. One extremely popular and quality guide is [Tae Kim's Guide to Learning Japanese](#). Written, and even available through [Amazon](#), as a book, Tae Kim's Guide covers everything you need to know to get started learning Japanese.

Another great choice is [Pomax's Introduction to Japanese](#).

If you'd like to follow a different path, you can follow the subsections below.

Textbooks

If you're interested in a more traditional form of study, you may be looking for a recommendation of a textbook. In [/r/LearnJapanese](#), the most commonly recommended textbook series is Genki. Currently available in its third edition, the Genki consists of two textbooks (GENKI I: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese and Genki: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese II) with companion workbooks. The books and associated media are designed to be used to help in learning speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, with additional segments for cultural information. These textbooks are commonly used in college and university settings and cover the first two years of study at a common pace.

These books are available for purchase from many sources, such as Amazon.com (Amazon.com Purchase Links: [Genki I](#) | [Genki I Workbook](#) | [Genki II](#) | [Genki II Workbook](#)) and traditional brick-and-mortar resellers.

Additional choices for textbooks, such as the Nakama series, can be found on the [Resources](#) page of the wiki.

Most importantly, if you're enrolled in a Japanese course at your school or university, **use whichever textbook your instructor has assigned**. If it's assigned by your instructor, you can be pretty sure it's all right, and you can always ask them for help.

Supplementary Study

The following are not mandatory but will aid you greatly in your understanding of the language and can make all the difference.

	Grammar	Vocabulary	Kanji	Speaking	Listening
Online	Imabi	Genki	Memrise(free) or Wanikani(premium)	Language exchange, shadowing, and more	Language Exchange or media
Texts & Audiobooks	A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Grammar	-	Kodansha Kanji Learner's Course	Pimsleur	Pimsleur

[Skip to main content](#)[Log In](#)

- [Making Sense of Japanese - What the Textbooks Don't Tell You](#)

Moving Forward

So now you've completed the basics, and are looking for a way to further your language study. At this point, you should have a decent foundation as a beginner and be on your way to becoming an intermediate learner. There are many routes to follow. Some choose to stay with a more defined study plan, while others choose to take time to expand their vocabulary and knowledge with non-traditional routes such as fan translations, in particular scanlation(translation of scanned original Japanese manga).

Textbooks

For those who have completed their first foray into Japanese, and are looking for a next step in traditional study, Tobira: Gateway to Advanced Japanese Learning Through Content and Multimedia ([Amazon Link](#)) is commonly recommended on [/r/LearnJapanese](#). It has been described as Integrated Japanese III by some readers and is useful for any learner who has completed any of the many introductory series.

JLPT

Another route that many choose is to start studying for the [Japanese Language Proficiency Test](#), or JLPT. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test is a standardized Japanese test offered by the Japanese government that is held once a year (or twice a year, in some countries). Whether you want to take it is up to you, but many people feel that it's not an accurate representation of proficiency, as it lacks speaking and writing components, and it's pretty easy to do well on the test just by studying the JLPT itself instead of actually learning Japanese. Despite what you might hear, N1 (the highest level) is not strictly necessary to get a job in Japan; whether or not an employer will want it depends on your industry and the individual company. That said, there's no harm in taking it if you feel like it. However, if you plan to immigrate to Japan, entering as a "[highly skilled foreign professional](#)" with proof of Japanese fluency will give you 15 points, and this is usually done by JLPT N1 certification.

JLPT Levels

The current JLPT consists of five levels, ranging from N5 to N1, with N5 being the lowest level and N1 being the highest level. A summary of the assumptions is loosely covered in this [link](#).

References

General Information

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[Log In](#)

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Last revised by [Moon Atomizer](#) 3 years ago