

# REMEMBERING THE KANA

*A Guide to Reading and Writing the  
Japanese Syllabaries in 3 Hours Each*

*Part One*

**HIRAGANA**

James W. Heisig

*Part Two*

**KATAKANA**

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**THIRD EDITION**

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The aim of this little book is a simple one: to help you teach yourself to read and write the two Japanese syllabaries, the hiragana and the katakana, in three hours each. By “three hours” is meant three cumulative hours of hard work, not three continuous hours of unbroken study, and certainly not three hours in a classroom with a teacher and other students.

The two parts of the book, set back to back, follow the same method, are laid out in the same format, and share common tables at the end of the volume. Readers who already know one or the other of the syllabaries completely can pass it over and go directly to the part they wish to learn. If you are a newcomer, you should begin directly with the course on the hiragana before tackling the katakana.

The syllabaries are arranged in their “dictionary order,” not in the order in which you will learn them. Following the instructions on each page will send you skipping forwards and backwards as you make your way through each lesson. In LESSONS 3 to 5 of the hiragana course you will be taught a simple way to remember the dictionary order, which is indispensable for consulting Japanese dictionaries.

If you have already learned a few of the hiragana, you might be tempted to chart your own course. Don't. You would be better advised not to use the book at all than to try to guide yourself through the labyrinth of this book. The method builds up step by step, and you will need the principles taught at the earlier stages to follow the directions given later. If you must, rush quickly through the material with which you already feel comfortable. But rush *through* it, not *over* it.

After each lesson, you will be asked to take a break. This is meant to increase your efficiency and to help you concentrate all your attention on the task at hand for short periods of 30 minutes or less. If you were to do two lessons a day, you could complete the six lessons on the third day. This seems the ideal way to proceed.

In any case, you should begin by reading the INTRODUCTION specific to the syllabary in question. You will be given instructions at the end how to begin.

When you have finished the book, do not forget to read the AFTERWORD that follows PART TWO. There you will find help with tackling the study of the final hurdle in your study of the Japanese writing system: the kanji.

#### A WORD ABOUT PRONUNCIATION

Compared with English, Japanese is a “sound-poor” language, and this is reflected in the fact that instead of an “alphabet” of individual vowels and consonants that can be combined in a variety of ways, Japanese uses a syllabary of 45 basic sounds and about 77 derivative sounds formed by the voiced and plosive pronunciations of certain consonants and by diphthongs. The full range of sounds is included in the tables on pages 146 and 147.

This does not mean that all the sounds of Japanese exist in English, or that the familiar letters of the Roman alphabet refer to precisely the same sound in Japanese that they do in English. The only way to learn how to pronounce Japanese properly is with the aid of a native speaker. In this book pronunciation is only indicated by a rough equivalent to English (or more precisely, General American).

#### A NOTE ON THE HISTORY AND USE OF THE KANA

Using the hiragana and katakana correctly will require skills that no Western language is equipped to provide you with. These are matters that fall outside the scope of these pages. Still, it is helpful to have a general idea of what is involved and why.

When the Chinese writing system was introduced to Japan around the sixth century CE, there was no native system of writing for it to replace or merge with, and the sounds of the language were quite different from those the Chinese and Korean settlers were accustomed to. The only solution was to assign each sound a Chinese character, or kanji, to approximate the pronunciation. For several centuries a catalogue of some 970 unmodified Chinese characters, or kanji, were used as phonetic symbols for the 88 syllables then used in the Japanese language.

As early as the middle of the eighth century some of these kanji were given a “rounded” or “common” (hira) form based on brush calligraphy as “substitutes” (kana) for some of the more widely used Chinese letters. During the early middle ages of Japan’s Heian period (794–1185), a style of writing using only these forms came into use, creating the first phonetic syllabaries with a one-to-one relationship between sound and written form. Initially it was used only by women, but by the early tenth century was recognized as an official way of writing, namely, the hiragana.

Today the hiragana are used for writing indigenous Japanese words, for adding inflections to words written with kanji, and for writing words whose kanji are rare or at least outside the standard lists taught in the schools.

The forms of the katakana also derived from Chinese kanji, but unlike the hiragana they were based less on calligraphic writing than on the extraction of a “part” (kata) of the full kanji to represent particular sounds. These forms were written in a square, blocked style to set them off still more from the hiragana. From the ninth century, the katakana appear in use as a mnemonic device for remembering how to pronounce Buddhist texts written in Chinese. Only much later, in 1900 to be exact, would they be standardized for the writing of foreign loan-words and onomatopoeia. Until the dawn of the computer age, they were also used for telegrams.

To sum up, the written Japanese is made up of three forms:

**Kanji.** Complex characters originating from Chinese and imported into Japan around the sixth century CE. There are some 80,000 of them in all, but Japan has narrowed their use by introducing a list of “general-use kanji” into the education system. A typical Japanese university graduate will be able to recognize around 3,000 of these Sino-Japanese characters.

**Hiragana.** One of the two syllabic alphabets or “syllabaries” of Japanese. It is used mainly to write indigenous Japanese words and to inflect words written with kanji.

**Katakana.** The second of the two syllabaries of Japanese. It is used mainly for foreign names and terms, and for onomatopoeia.

These three written forms coexist in Japanese, and it is not uncommon to find all three in a single phrase. Consider this example of a Japanese

phrase that combines kanji (bold type), hiragana (italics), and katakana (normal):

私の名前がマリアです。

**Watashi no namae ga** *Maria desu.*

My name is Maria.

Obviously, the only way to attain fluency in written Japanese is to learn all three forms of writing. This little book should get you well on your way.

It only remains for me to express my gratitude to Pat Crosby and Keith Leber of the University of Hawai'i Press for their assistance in making this new edition possible. Special thanks are due to Helmut Morsbach and Kurebayashi Kazue, who collaborated in the accompanying course on the katakana that forms PART TWO of the present book. It was their initiative to undertake the project and their devotion that saw it through to the end.

James W. Heisig  
*1 December 2006*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE HIRAGANA

The course that follows is intended for self study. It did not grow out of classroom experience and is not intended for classroom use. For one thing, I am not a language instructor. Most of my students are Japanese, who knew the hiragana by the first grade or before. I did not absorb myself in research on the Japanese syllabaries, survey existing methods, draft a set of mnemonic techniques, test them out systematically on a group of students, carefully record the results, and only then deliver a completed manuscript to the publishers. But neither did the idea occur to me on my own. The facts of the matter are a lot humbler: I wrote the book on a dare.

A visiting professor who had studied my earlier volumes on *Remembering the Kanji* was having trouble remembering the hiragana and casually tossed the challenge at my feet one evening over a mug of beer: “Why hasn’t anybody figured out an easy way to learn the syllabary?” I didn’t know if anyone had or not, but the next morning I took a sheet of white paper and wrote in large bold letters: LEARN THE HIRAGANA IN 3 HOURS. I set the paper on the corner of my desk and resolved not to publish anything until I was satisfied I had grounds to justify its boast. From the very beginning I was aware that I was up to something outlandish.

Fortunately, the chore turned out to be a lot easier than I had anticipated, and the basic text was completed in a few days. Once you have finished the task yourself, I am confident you will see how really simple the idea behind it is.

But enough of how this book was written. It is time to begin, following the instruction in the box below.

→ GO TO PAGE 55

# LESSON 1

Before beginning, take a moment to familiarize yourself with the various elements that appear on the individual pages of this book.

② さ

③ ④ 左 → さ SA ①

⑤ Beneath the familiar *dagger* is the lower half of the component for *comb*. Let us call it a *hairpin* to remember the similarity of form. The key word here is a *sock*, a particularly old and raunchy one that some lady of questionable taste has stuck in her hair using a *dagger* as a *hairpin* to hold it in place.

⑥ ㇀ ㇁ ㇂

⑦ Note that in nearly all typographical forms, the second and third strokes run together. The more you write the character according to the hand-drawn model above, the more you will acquire a feel for how the two strokes naturally blend into one another.

⑧ PRONUNCIATION  
samurai | sock

⑨ さ さ さ  
さ さ さ

⑩ さら sara  
⑪ くさい kusai  
けさ kesa

⑬ ← 20 → GO TO PAGE 11 ⑫

- ① The pronunciation of the hiragana in question, in standard romanized form.
- ② The hiragana character itself.

The placing of the elements will aid you later in reviewing. By opening the book part way, you can page through and see only the romanized form, leaving the actual hiragana hidden from view.

- ③ The original Chinese character (or kanji) from which the hiragana in question is derived.
- ④ The same kanji written in calligraphic form to show more clearly how it came to its present-day hiragana form.

You should not attempt to memorize the information in this frame now, though at a more advanced level you may find it interesting and helpful for learning the pronunciation of the original kanji.

- ⑤ An explanation of how to remember the hiragana.
- ⑥ Instructions on how to write the hiragana form, stroke by stroke, just as Japanese children do when they are first learning to write.
- ⑦ From time to time a supplementary note, set in italic type, is added with information regarding the writing or pronunciation of a particular hiragana form.
- ⑧ Familiar English words are given as pronunciation samples, since the romanized forms of the hiragana often suggest sounds in English different from those assigned to the hiragana. If you studied Latin, or know a romance language already, these examples will be largely superfluous.
- ⑨ This frame contains 6 examples of stylized typefaces, intended to show the flexibility permitted in writing particular hiragana. You should not attempt to imitate these; it is enough that you take a moment to recognize them.
- ⑩ ⑪ Sample words in which the hiragana being studied appears. The examples use only hiragana that have been learned up to that point, which means you should be able to identify them all—as well as reproduce them all from their romanization. You should not skip any of the examples, though there is no need to bother learning what the words actually mean in Japanese.

- ⑫ The page to proceed to after finishing this page.
- ⑬ The page from which you have just come.

At this point, if you haven't already done so, secure several sheets of blocked paper with blocks at least 1 cm. (1/2 in.) square. You can find them at any stationery store. This will help you keep the shape of your hiragana in proper balance much better than practicing on blank or simple lined paper will.

One more thing. Take a look at the clock and make a note of the time. In less than 30 minutes from now you will be asked to record the time you have spent on these first 9 hiragana in the box provided below.

→ GO TO PAGE 50



Time: LESSON 1

Congratulations! You have just learned 9 of the 46 hiragana, and probably spent less than 30 minutes doing so.

Just above you will see a small box marked *Time: LESSON 1*. Record there how long it took you to complete this first lesson. We will do this at the end of each lesson.

A word about reviewing. If you took your time with each hiragana as you came to it, if you practiced writing it several times, repeating the explanation to yourself as you went, and if you tested yourself on all the sample words, there should be no need to retrace your steps. If you do get stuck, turn to the ALPHABETIC LIST on page 145, locate the problem hiragana, and go through the page all over again, top to bottom. Whatever you do, do NOT waste your time writing any of the hiragana over and over again.

In case you are wondering whether learning to write the hiragana will also mean that you know how to read them, I can assure you that it will. Let me show you how easy it is. Try reading aloud the following six words:

いけん	のく
いんこ	あへん
くに	この

All the sounds we have learned so far are contained in these words. Once again, do not worry that you don't know what they mean; the only thing we are after here is learning the syllabary.

If you were planning on heading right into LESSON 2, change your plans and take a break now for at least 30 minutes. Go out for a walk or stretch out on the sofa. Your mind has been watching images fly around like shuttlecocks and should be a bit dizzy just now.

END OF LESSON 1

N

无 → ㄣ

ん

The first of the hiragana forms we shall learn is also the easiest. It is exactly like the handwritten, cursive form of the Roman letter **n** (n), except for the longer stem.

In romanized Japanese, whenever this hiragana is followed by a vowel, an apostrophe is added to avoid confusing it with *na*, *ni*, *nu*, *ne*, or *no*. We will see an example of this use of the apostrophe later in this first lesson.

ん

PRONUNCIATION

sing | ran

ん ん ん  
ん ん ん

← 57

→ GO TO PAGE 6

I



The roman letter i is drawn with two strokes, one main stroke and a dot to cap it off. So is the hiragana we are going to learn now. The first strokes of the two are almost identical. And just as, when you are writing quickly, the dot on your i often ends off over to the right, so is the second, shorter stroke of the hiragana always set to the right.

When you practice writing the form, take a pencil and trace over the strokes as they are given below. Almost immediately you should “feel” the flow from the first stroke to the second. After practicing the form once or twice on blocked paper, test yourself on the examples that follow below.



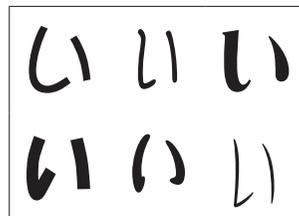
PRONUNCIATION  
graffiti | king

ii

い い

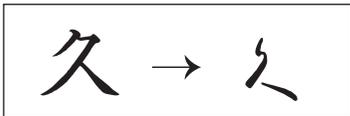
in

い ん



← 50      → GO TO PAGE 12

KU

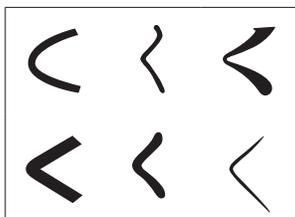


The shape of this next member of the hiragana family is formed exactly like the right side of the infamous computer-game character known as “Pacman.” If you think of the sound it makes munching up the dots on the screen as the **cooing** of a baby, you can actually see the word **coo** in the computer graphics: ☺○○○○○. Whether you find it easier to think of the *U* as a squared off *C* or as the mouth of a baby Pacman gulping down little *o*'s, you shouldn't have any trouble at all associating this simple shape with its pronunciation.



PRONUNCIATION  
cook | coup d'état

iku	い く
kun	く ん
kui	く い



← 6 → GO TO PAGE 33



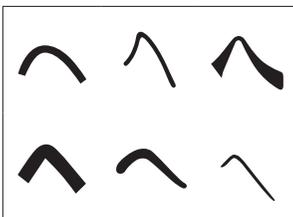
HE

Not forgetting what was said in the INTRODUCTION about the vowels generally being shorter in Japanese than they are in English, you can think of this next hiragana as a small **haystack**, which it rather resembles and which, happily, also provides a link with the sound.



PRONUNCIATION

hay | shame



へん

hen

へい

hei

いへん

ihen

← 12      → GO TO PAGE 29

の



NO

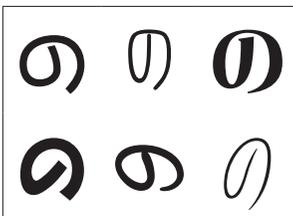
The internationally recognized sign for **no** is a circle with a slash running through it: . The easiest way to draw it with a single stroke is to begin in the upper right, draw the slash, and then bring the circle around. The only other thing you have to remember is that there is **no** closing the circle.

When this hiragana appears as a part of another hiragana (with only a slight alteration of shape), we will take it to mean a **no parking sign**. An example follows later in this lesson.



PRONUNCIATION

no | rhino



への	heno
のんの	nonno
くの	kuno

← 33      → GO TO PAGE 13

け

計 → け

KE

This hiragana is made up of two pieces. On the left, and drawn first, is a single slightly curved shape that looks like a **cape** you might hang on the back of a stick figure. (Draw one to see for yourself.)

To the right is a two-stroke shape that resembles a **dagger** with the hilt at the top and the blade below.

The sound *ke* is close enough to the English word **cape** to get us going. Just twist the common phrase “cloak and dagger” into the image of a sinister **cape-and-dagger** figure and the work is done. When you draw the pieces, think of them as images, saying the words to yourself as you go along.

↓ け

PRONUNCIATION  
cape | kangaroo

け け け  
け け け

けい                      kei  
のけ                      noke  
けんい                    ken'i

← 29                      → GO TO PAGE 5

あ

安 → あ

A

You should now be in the middle of LESSON 1. If you are not, go at once to page 55 and start from the beginning.

The syllable *a* begins with a *dagger*, its “blade” bending to the right so as to flow into the next stroke. Below it a *no-parking sign*. (Note that when の is used as a “piece” of another hiragana, the cross-slash protrudes out the top slightly—a kind of “post” to hang the sign on.)

The sound *a* calls to mind a playful little **otter**, swimming on his back in the middle of a pond whose banks are picketed on all sides by *no-parking signs*. On his tummy are a stack of *daggers*, which he is tossing one by one at the signs, clapping his paws with glee each time he hits a bull’s eye.

→ 十 あ

PRONUNCIATION

on | father

あ	あ	あ
あ	あ	あ

あの	ano
あく	aku
あけの	akeno

← 13 → GO TO PAGE 14

KO



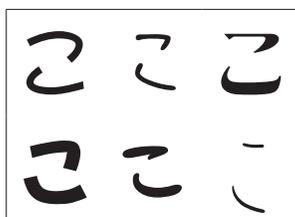
Try drawing a pair of rounded **combs**, the kind a woman might use to bind her hair into a bun. The first two strokes you would begin with (the frame, without the teeth) form the very shape that give us our next hiragana, pronounced, conveniently enough, *ko*.

Notice the slight hooking at the end of the first stroke. It is absent in “cleaner,” more modern stylizations of the hiragana and is not absolutely necessary. In any case, you will find that when you write the hiragana for *ko*, the little hook forms itself naturally as your pencil flows from the first stroke to the second.



PRONUNCIATION  
comb | rococo

kono	この
kon	こん
keiko	けいこ



← 5 → GO TO PAGE 26

NI



に

On the right side you see the hiragana we just learned for こ. But here the *combs* are out of the hair and glued firmly onto your **kneecaps**, one on each side, so that when you put your legs together, the teeth of the *combs* interlock and you have a devil of a time getting your legs apart. Now imagine pulling your *cape* around from the back and holding it between your legs to keep the *combs* from linking.

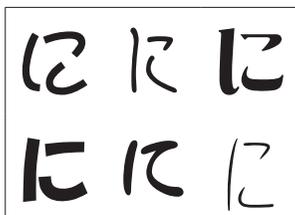
Close your eyes for a few seconds and let the image take shape, focusing first on the **kneecaps** and then on its composite pieces, the two *combs* and the *cloak*. Now open your eyes and look at the hiragana. You should be able to “see” the image before you. The next time you hear the sound *ni*, the whole ludicrous scene should come back to life for you.



PRONUNCIATION

knee | anise

nin	にん
kuni	くに
niko	にこ



← 14

→ GO TO PAGE 57