

Japanese is Possible!

Lesson 1

Welcome!

Chances are that if you're looking at this page right now, you've thought at one point in your life, "y'know, it would probably be fun to know Japanese, but how?" Undoubtedly, it sure looks like a formidable task, what with all of its confusing-looking writing and its reputation for having a most unusual sentence structure. Well have no fear. If you really want to learn Japanese, these lessons can give you a push in the right direction. If you're not already convinced that it's a good idea, here are:

Nine great reasons to study Japanese!

Reason #1

Spoken by over 130 million people, Japanese is the among the top 10 languages on Earth.

Reason #2

In the world of console video games/anime, it rises to 1st place. Most console games (Playstation, Nintendo, Game Boy) are released nearly a year earlier than they are in the USA, if they are released here at all.

Reason #3

Even today, Japanese voice actors tend to put more soul and realism into their Anime roles than their American counterparts (not to anger any dub fans out there). Wouldn't it be nice to have the best of both worlds? Good (Japanese) voice acting without having to read your Anime!

Reason #4

There are a LOT of anime series (and video games) out there in Japanese only. Some good titles too! It would be nice to be able to understand them.

Reason #5

Many of your family, friends, classmates and/or co-workers believe Japanese is hard. Show them what you can do! They'll think you have special talent.

Actually, anyone can learn it if they want to, but people have a way of being really impressed about somebody approaching the Japanese language. I say this from experience.

Reason #6 "Speaks Japanese" looks great on a resume, no matter what your line of work. Knowing any second language helps, but Japanese will have a greater effect on an employer, since not many Americans know it. (which can't be said for Spanish, for example)

Reason #7

Japan has the second largest economy in the world, so their language is very relevant.

Reason #8

Japan has a fascinating culture, much of which is reflected in its language.

Reason #9

Japan controls both the video game and Anime industries. This allows you to learn a language while enjoying an Anime or playing a video game! What other language gives you such opportunities?

Reason #10

Japan has a lot great music. It's very enjoyable to listen to it, but to hear it and actually know what's being said is an even better experience.

Ok, there was a bit of a trend in most of those reasons, but learning Japanese is a great idea even if you're not a hardcore anime fan (as I personally am not).

How will you teach me Japanese?

This is the first in a long line of lessons that you will find here on Maktos. A number of them were written years ago and are currently being revised, so you will see those arriving bit by bit in the coming weeks. In the long term, I plan to extend the lessons in this site beyond what has currently been written. So visit often, updates are popping up all the time.

I will start at the very beginning, assuming that you know nothing about Japanese right now. All you need is the desire to learn it, and I'll help with the rest!

Here are some of the many areas I will cover:

- Getting started
- Getting and staying motivated
- Getting the books you need
- Learning the spoken language
- Learning the written language (when the time comes)
- Learning Japanese on a tight budget
- Finding Japanese language resources on the vast Internet
- Getting free Japanese word processor software
- Getting a really good computer dictionary - for free
- Using many different resources, to make learning Japanese fun
- Finding things you can do - easily - to speed up the process
- Finding the best way for you learn

4 MYTHS about Japanese:

1. "Japanese is hard"

After much study and talking to several people, I must say that Japanese is not "hard" or "complex", but "different". It's true that it is very different from English or Spanish. However, the grammar, spelling, etc. is very straightforward. Making sentences in the language, conversing, etc. can occur very early on. The pronunciation is very close to Spanish, although the accent is different.

2. "You need to learn all those difficult symbols"

Those "difficult symbols" are the Kanji, borrowed from the Chinese. There are 1900 Kanji in daily use in Japan. While it is true that the Kanji are probably the most difficult part of Japanese, you can ignore them for quite a while and still enjoy the rest of the language. I will teach many of the beginning lessons in roman characters, so you will have nothing new to learn as far as reading the lessons. I will slowly make the transition to phonetic characters and perhaps in the distant future, I will teach you some Kanji.

To be able to write any word in Japanese, all you need to know are the 2 phonetic systems, "Hiragana" and "Katakana". They only have 46 letters each, and can be learned very easily in a matter of weeks. Plus, once you know how something is pronounced in one word, you know it for any word. It's completely phonetic. Don't you wish English was that way!

3. **"I don't have time to learn it!"**

This is a common reason why many people aren't bilingual in Japanese right now. If you don't have a goal in mind, or guidance, you won't notice how much time is spent doing nothing.

If you take a look at your average day from an objective standpoint, you'll find many wasted hours and minutes. Look how much time is spent waiting. Waiting in line, waiting for someone to show up, waiting for the commercials to end, waiting for the movie to start, etc. That wasted time can be used constructively to inch you toward your goal of learning Japanese!

4. **"You have to learn Japanese in a formal classroom environment"**

That is pretty easily shot down. I learned Japanese for three years before ever setting foot in a classroom (to learn Japanese, that is). When I finally had the opportunity to take Japanese classes, I placed into a Second-Year Japanese course in an Ivy League school. I've met people who took French and Spanish for three or four years in high school and couldn't place into their respective Second-Year courses. In other words, you don't need a classroom to learn Japanese, you just need to utilize your resources.

Taking a class works for many people. I know it has helped me. I certainly recommend taking a class if you have the opportunity in addition to following this column. You DON'T have to take a class to keep up with this column, though.

What is a classroom? A place of opportunity where you can learn. There are people who go to class and don't learn, and some that seize the opportunity. There are also people that master whole fields of knowledge without going to a classroom. A classroom is just one of the many ways to learn.

Join us in the next lesson, where we give you some useful resources for your study of the Japanese language.

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Japanese is Possible!

Lesson 2

Some helpful tips

Your brain is a very powerful tool, even more than you realize. You can learn new things, and unlearn things that were in error. Unlearning in particular tends to require a lot of repetition. You must beat the corrected information into your head, just as the falsehood was beat into your head over a period of years. Eventually, you'll prevail.

In learning Japanese (and this goes for almost any goal you set), the sooner you can unlearn that "it's hard" the sooner you'll be able to make rapid progress. If you've already taken my word for it and believe it, good for you.

At first, Japanese may sound very foreign to you, and your confidence may falter at times. As you begin to listen to it and learn more about it, you will become more comfortable with it. I speak from experience on this.

I strongly suggest that you "make friends" with the Japanese language. Don't treat it as a monster you wish to tame, but rather approach it like a friend and an ally, something you want to do, a fun hobby that you only approach when you want to. Try to rekindle the love of learning that children have. Some of you still have that love of learning, and that's great.

If you treat Japanese like a chore, it will be much harder to learn. Let's think of Japanese study as something fun you will do alongside your favorite hobby - anime, video games, music, or talking for that matter. You will get more enjoyment out of any one of these.

There are many "resources" you can use in the study of Japanese, each giving you practice in one or two particular areas. For example, listening to Japanese music helps you in the following areas:

- Getting rid of the "foreign" feel
- Learning new words (and remembering them well)
- Learning pronunciation

As this column progresses, I will point out the best ways to improve yourself in each area.

Don't worry about what you don't know, but rather focus on what you do know. Take it one step at a time. "Rome wasn't built in a day", as the saying goes. On the other hand, it's very fun to look back at how far you've come in a week, month, or year!

If you're not used to learning things on your own, don't worry. I'll help you out as much as any teacher or professor. Also, the people in this site's forum are always eager to help people with any questions they have. Remember that even in a classroom environment, it's still up to you to learn. If you don't apply yourself in a class, you fail to learn anything. Conversely, if you study outside of class, and do your homework, you will end up with an A. Why not just study on your own

to begin with? As long as you have the materials and the guidance, you should be able to make impressive progress.

There will be more specific tips as the lessons progress. For instance, when studying word lists, early morning is the best time. That is because your brain, like wet cement, is VERY receptive to new information at that time. Have you ever awakened to a horrible song on your alarm clock radio, and then tried to get it out of your head? It's almost impossible. This works to your advantage when you are trying to memorize something. If you set aside at least 5 or 10 minutes in the morning, you will notice the difference. Studies have found that school kids do better in their 1st hour classes for the same reason.

First steps in learning Japanese

Getting the Right Mindset

Unless you watch a lot of subtitled anime, you probably aren't very familiar with Japanese, and it probably sounds foreign to you. When you hear it, your instinct is to ignore it as a "foreign" language. You must try to think of Japanese dialog as simply, "words I don't know yet". In other words, you must believe that "Japanese is Possible".

Realize How Much Time You Have to Learn

You may think you have very little time, but you might be surprised how much time you can scrape together. Important parts of learning Japanese, such as "Word Lists" can be done anytime, anywhere. You only need 10 seconds in a row to look at a list and study some words! Other things can be done at the same time as other things. You can listen to Japanese music or Anime while surfing the Web, for example.

Start thinking about how you could manage your time better, to give yourself some time each day to study. Not much time is required - just enough to look at a word list a few times, read part of a "Learn Japanese" book, or watch a subtitled Anime. (That part won't take too much discipline!)

The idea is to do a little bit every day. We've all heard the fable of "The Tortoise and the Hare". Indeed, when learning a language, "Slow and steady wins the race".

Here's an interesting analogy I found on the Internet on managing your time:

(by James R. Beach)

A professor walks into the room carrying an empty 10-gallon water jug and dragging an obviously heavy bag. He places them on the teacher's desk. Without a word, he begins placing white rocks, just big enough to fit through the mouth of the jug, into the jug until they reach the very top. "Is it full?" he asks. The class nods.

"Maybe not," he says. He then stuffs tiny pebbles into the jug and the pebbles find their way through the cracks in the rock. "Full now?" he asks. The whole class nods.

He then shovels sand into the jug, occasionally shaking the jug, and the tiny grains sift through the rocks and pebbles. "OK," he says, "now is it full?" The class nods in unison.

He smiles. He then slowly pours water into the jug until a water glass is finally empty.

"The lesson here," he says, "is that there is always more room in our lives than we think there is. When you think you're out of time, there is still more available if you look for it."

Here's the time-saving payoff:

The ROCKS are the important things we have to accomplish regularly to be successful. They go into our "time jug" first, because they are most important. The PEBBLES represent those things we may not like to do, but we must do. They go in next. The SAND represents things that we should do, we may even like to do, but they're not as important. The WATER represents the few remaining things that make a difference. If you reverse the order, putting in the water, then the sand, then the pebbles, there will not be enough room for the rocks. So prioritize your activities and make sure the rocks go on your schedule first.

So the moral is, whether Japanese is a rock or the water, there's always space for even a little bit of it in your day, as long as you're ready to do it when the opportunity comes.

Rent some anime DVDs.

Whether you are an anime fan or not, it can be a serious help for your study of Japanese, especially if you don't have any other resource for listening to Japanese dialogue. Anime DVDs are great because they almost always have the Japanese speech available. If you don't have a DVD player, you might be able to rent subtitled anime on tape and you can definitely buy it. Chances are slim that you won't find anything that you don't enjoy at least a little bit, so give it a try, it's a very useful method.

For instance, you can pause the tape or DVD and look up a word you don't know in a Japanese dictionary. You can then write the word on a list so you can learn it! If it was used in an Anime, it's probably a good word to learn. On the other hand, writing down random words from a Japanese dictionary is a horribly inefficient way of building a vocabulary. (Don't laugh...many people have tried it!) I will focus on vocabulary building again in lesson four

If you don't know where to start with anime buying, here are some tips. You can get Anime at Best Buy, Media Play, and other like stores. Also check small hobby shops. If you happen to live in the vicinity of a Yaohan (Japanese mall-like place) you should definitely stop by and see what they have there! If you don't have a store that sells Anime in your vicinity, you can always turn to the Internet. We don't have any links right now, but we may soon.

Remember, it's up to you to work on learning Japanese. I can guide you, but I can't force you to learn.

Next week - Japanese pronunciation

Other areas will be discussed as well, so don't miss it!



Japanese is Possible!
Lesson 3

Information you will need

- Pronunciation
- Using the Internet
- Plain vs. Polite
- Japanese Music

Vowel Sounds

The vowel sounds in Japanese are as follows:

A as in "father"
E as in "seven eleven"
I as in "Easter treat"
O as in "open, Pope"
U as in "fruity moogle"

You'll notice that the vowels are pronounced the similarly to Spanish, Italian, and Latin (and several other European languages)

Pronunciation of these vowels is very consistant. There are no silent vowels (although sometimes the Japanese choose not to voice a vowel). Each vowel sound is pronounced distinctly.

For example, the word

kaeru

would be pronounced "KAH eh roo". In English, you might want to pronounce it "KAY roo" or "KAY ruh".

The vowels 'i' and 'u' are weak vowels. That means that many times they are not pronounced. The most important example is:

desu (the u is silent - pronounced DESS)

However, don't just go around dropping u's and i's. People will have no idea what you're saying.

Consonant sounds are generally pronounced the same way as in English, but there are a few differences:

R - Pronounced like a combination of 'L' and 'D', with a bit of 'R' mixed in. It's pretty close to how the R is pronounced in Spanish. (It isn't "trilled", however) In Spanish, an R sounds a lot like a 'D'. Consider this: Say "lu." Notice how you

drag the tip of your tongue along the roof of your mouth. To say a Japanese R, just briefly touch the tip to that spot at the moment you say the consonant, and use a little more "punch" in your voice.

F - You can pronounce it like an F, but often it sounds more like an 'H'.

There is no accent in Japanese, meaning there is no emphasis on a particular part of a word. English and Spanish have accents, Japanese does not.

Japanese does have pitch inflections, and this is their substitute for accents. For example, in English, we put stress on a certain part of a word to make it sound right and this is marked by an apostrophe-like symbol in the dictionary. In Japanese, they do not put stress on their words but raise the pitch of their voices instead. In Chinese, there are patterns to move between five different pitches to distinguish a word's meaning. In Japanese, there are only two pitches, but the only real way to grasp where to raise the pitch of your voice is from listening to Japanese speech and repeating it.

For practice in this area:

- Listen to Japanese music
- Watch subtitled (or Japanese language) Anime

Listening to Japanese music is enjoyable, and helps you out tremendously in many areas. You can download MP3s from many websites, and purchase import CD's from many other websites. If you don't know what's good, try downloading MP3's of different songs. When you find out what artists you like, support them by purchasing their CDs.

Some songs I would recommend to anyone are the Xenogears Creid songs. Inspired by the famous Xenogears game for Playstation, these songs are eclectic and beautiful! The lyrics are easy to understand in many of the songs, and the songs are very unique. Some of the songs don't even have lyrics, but they're still wonderful!

For links to great Japanese and Anime related MP3 sites, scroll to the end of this column.

Grammar Terms - part 1

You'll need to know a few basics about grammar to be able to make sentences. I'll go over the basics, to be fair to those of you that slept through English class. ^_^

Subject

The person or thing that performs the action of the sentence's verb.

Example:

The man jumped through the frog.

"man" would be the subject of the sentence, since he is the one who jumped.

Adjective

A word used to describe a person, place, or thing

Example:

The man jumped through the holographic frog.

"holographic" is an adjective, since it DESCRIBES the frog. Since frog is a noun,

any word describing the frog would be an adjective.

Adverb

A word used to modify a verb

Example:

The man quickly jumped through the frog.

"quickly" is the adverb, since it describes how he jumped. Jump is the verb, so any word describing how he jumped would be an adverb.

Direct Object

Is the entity on which the verb is performed

Example:

The woman ate the apple.

Now figuring out the direct object is straightforward - simply ask the question, "She ate WHAT?"

The question would be answered, "the apple". So "apple" would be the direct object.

For practice in this area:

- Purchase a good Japanese grammar book
- Find websites that cover grammar
- Review an English grammar textbook

Plain vs. Polite form

Unlike English, Japanese has distinct levels of formality in speech and writing, four main ones to be precise. One speaks differently among friends than to one's boss. In America, that difference would mainly be reflected in tone of voice, and use of slang words, contractions and so on. In Japanese however, there are actually different words and verb endings for this purpose.

If you've watched Anime, you may have noticed that royalty (princesses, kings) speak differently than most other characters. There are hundreds of examples, including "Ayeka" from Tenchi Muyo.

In most Japanese language courses, the polite form is taught first. The instructors reason that you can use the polite form anywhere (including with friends). The plain form is only acceptable with friends and close family members.

However, the plain form is by far more common in songs, books, manga, anime and on television. Since this website is somewhat focused around anime, and for other good reasons, we will begin by teaching the plain form. Here are a number of reasons.

1. Anime and video games tend to use the plain form, and that is where most people will use their Japanese skills unless they go to Japan. Even if you make Japanese friends in America, they will speak to you with the plain form and will definitely not feel insulted if you do the same. I personally have had conversations with Japanese teenagers, and they have told me that I sound funny because I speak so politely (I learned Japanese starting with the polite form and I consider myself a polite person anyway, so that's why I use it.)

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